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KEATON & CHAPLIN TONITE
HILDEGARDE AT THE ORGAN
SOLD OUT

RED RIVER'S FARGO THEATRE

Photos by Harold B. Velline, Jr.

The story of the Fargo Theatre and its diminutive yet eloquent Wurlitzer theatre pipe organ deserves a preface; its story is one of renaissance in the truest sense. It's the story of the Red River Chapter, and of a community that has taken the shows to its heart, making them the most successful theatrical events in the area.

The Fargo Theatre organ (a style E) was shipped by the Rudolph Wurlitzer Company of North Tonawanda, New York, in January of 1926. It required two box cars to transport it to Fargo. The organ is installed in two chambers at each side of the proscenium. The Main chamber (on the left) houses the Concert Flute (smooth and light accompaniment stop), the Violin and its Celeste (particularly keen and orchestral counterparts) and the Diaphonic Diapason. The Concert Flute and Diaphonic Diapason ranks are augmented by pedal offsets which add power and majesty to the ensemble. The relay is also housed in the Main.

The Solo chamber (on the right) contains the Tibia Clausa (this one being particularly sweet and lush), the Vox Humana (throaty yet subtle), and the Style D Trumpet (notable for its characteristic solo sound and its ensemble blending ability). Percussions include the Main's Chryso-glott (this one with a long-sustained vibraphone quality), and the Solo's

Xylophone, Glockenspiel and Chimes. The Toy Counter contains the usual battery of traps and film cueing effects.

As is the case with nearly every theatre organ, when the talkies came on the scene the organ was forgotten. Patrons clamored for Vitaphone rather than the Wurlitzer-backed silent films, and the organ changed roles. For several years the organ was heard on WDAY radio. However, as the taste of the public changed, the Wurlitzer was covered with a tarp and neglected. Forgotten by most — but not by all.

Lance Johnson, organ builder and organist, after repeated (and frustrating) fruitless attempts to gain permission to see the organ, was finally given permission three years ago to try the instrument. The Plitt company (whose far-sightedness also allowed the restoration of the famous Chicago Theatre Wurlitzer) was interested and concerned for the future of this sparkling seven-ranker. Under the direction of crew chief Johnson, members of the Red River Chapter (ATOS) rebuilt the then-decrepit Wurlitzer. It has been 90% releathered, and is now 100% operable.

Several modifications have been made to greatly enhance the organ's versatility. A Tibia Quint (5 $\frac{1}{3}$) has been added to the pedal to allow clearer speech for jazz playing. The Diaphone and Bourdon sixteen-foot offsets, once affected by the Main tremulant, have been rewinded on untremmed regulators as they should be, providing for undistorted bass tones. The Great manual (Solo) now has a Super (or Octave) Coupler, allowing for brilliance heretofore unavailable. The Solo sixteen-foot (T.C.) Trumpet was rewired from second touch to first touch, making it more accessible for individual combinations or ensemble. Every pipe in the organ has been polished, and Johnson himself has tonally finished the entire organ, having learned the art as a part of his training for the organ factory he owns and supervises. His personal joy, and perhaps the most ambitious project to date, was the addition of a second Trumpet rank. In careful reflection of the seven original ranks, the second trumpet was voiced to "snarl" as would the Post Horn on a larger organ. Being duplexed with



The 2/8 Wurlitzer and the interior of the Fargo Theatre as it appeared to audiences in November, 1976.

(Harold B. Velline, Jr. Photo)

the Style D Trumpet, it succeeds in adding additional majesty to the ensemble without being overbearing.

Once the organ was in concert condition, the chapter felt the need to have the public share their joy in hearing the instrument. Ted Larson, professor of film study at Moorhead (Minnesota) State University, graciously shared a silent film starring daredevil comedian Harold Lloyd, and the re-debut of the restored organ was presented to a sold-out house. Johnson took his place at the Howard Seat, for he not only builds organs but he plays them as well! He holds a degree in classical organ, but his first love is the orchestral organ. With a style reminiscent of both Billy Nalle and Buddy Cole, he re-opened the organ with a powerful arrangement of "That's Entertainment!" From the beginning, his audience was held spellbound.

And that is history! A series of shows had begun and, in November of 1976, perhaps the greatest entertainment event in the history of the Fargo Theatre took place — the most memorable and significant show to date!

In addition to many nights spent working on the organ itself, chapter members have restored dressing rooms below the stage, cleaning and painting areas not used since the days of live stage productions. And, for this very special evening the orchestra pit was cleaned and

painted, and the theatre's original music stands were brought from storage, given a new coat of paint, and put in place in the pit.

Long unused stage lighting has been re-lamped to show some of the Fargo Theatre's original vaudeville backdrops, still hanging in the loft.

The theatre was buzzing by 7 p.m., November 11. And well it should — the entire theatre was sold out two days prior to the concert. At eight o'clock, Master of Ceremonies Doug Hamilton came center stage with a vaudeville backdrop looming behind. After sharing the theatre and organ's history, he introduced Lloyd Collins, the first organist on the program.

Collins began his musical career with piano study at the age of five.

His interest in theatre pipe organs began during the years he spent listening to the "Mighty Wurlitzers" in Seattle, Washington. After attaining a college degree in Music Education, he accompanied Peggy Lee (who began her career in Fargo) and played for USO camps overseas. He is presently educational director for one of the largest music stores in the Midwest, and is a classical organist of the highest caliber. His years of classical study and careful listening are apparent; his style is captivating — and while an exponent of Wright, Crawford and Dunstedter schools of theatre organ playing, he has his own unique style. Dazzling key

and registration changes, and lush harmonies contribute to the overall appeal of the Collins' touch.

Second on the program was the Wurlitzer's protector, Lance Johnson, leading the audience in a lusty sing-along that really loosened the ceiling joists! Great fun was had by all, and a program really could not occur without Lance making an appearance at the console. He is responsible for the sparkling sound of this remarkable eight ranker.

The Lloyd Collins segment featured the classic Charlie Chaplin two-reeler *Easy Street*, scored capably by Lloyd at the organ. Lance Johnson, who has scored several films in previous concerts, captured every nuance of the 1922 Buster Keaton film *The Blacksmith*.

Following a short intermission, M.C. Hamilton introduced Ted Larson, one of this country's most dedicated film collectors. Films are his passion, and he lives his passion day to day as he teaches film study at Moorhead (Minnesota) State University. Ted then began his introduction of the Dakota's greatest artist from the golden age of the theatre organ, Hildegard Usselman Kraus. Knowing this grand lady personally, Larson knew that the audience couldn't fully experience her music unless they had met her. So, in an extremely sophisticated multimedia presentation, slides provided a visual backing to a tape of Hildegard, speaking about her career and personal life. In hearing her speak, the audience was pulled into the vivacious aura this remarkable woman presents. In this sensitive and intimate way, each audience member was allowed to *know* Hildegard before hearing her play.

A colorful history decorates this woman's remarkable career which has spanned her lifetime. Years before she became the "Grand Lady of the Wurlitzer" audiences who thrilled to the films of Chaplin, Keaton, Pickford and Fairbanks (in the Dakotas) also thrilled to the piano scorings of those films by a young, energetic, and spirited teenager, Hildegard Usselman.

While Hildegard was taking college music courses, she frequented the Stone Music Company of Fargo which had become the headquarters for the local musicians of the time. Here she played piano, performing



Organist Lloyd Collins (L) and the organ's protector, Lance Johnson, with the "Grand Lady of the Wurlitzer," Hildegard Usselman Kraus. (Harold B. Veltow, Jr. Photos)

the latest sheet music hits each day. At the time the manager of the Orpheum Theatre was seeking a pianist who could accompany a silent film, and Hildegard's friends urged her to audition. She laughingly recalls, "None of the pianists could read the score, and I was no exception! There were just too many notes above the ledger lines. So I faked it . . . and I must have done alright!" Indeed! For she was hired on the spot and became an immediate success with the public. The manager offered her a permanent position playing for vaudeville shows as well.

By 1921 Hildegard was also playing piano on radio at WDAY (the old Garden Studios) and had become staff organist at the State Theatre. She continued her study of advanced music techniques at the Dakota Conservatory of Music (Fargo) and at the MacPhail School of Music. It was at this time that she studied with Eddie Dunstetter of "Old Minnesota Theatre" fame. Expanding her radio and film music career, Hildegard did live, remote broadcasts from the State and Fargo Theatres. During this time her popularity and radio fame demanded she be booked for in-person performances in Grand Forks, Bismarck, Jamestown, Minot and other cities across the Midwest.

When talking pictures arrived in Fargo, and demands for film scoring lessened, Hildegard accepted an offer to become full-time organist at WDAY, and continued to play special event programs at the Fargo

Theatre. For the next thirty years, her unique stylings of musical favorites made her broadcasts some of the best-loved radio programs ever to come out of the Fargo-Moorhead area. Such long-running shows as *Dream Time* and *Lady of the Evening* established for Hildegard a permanent place in the history of musical performers of the Midwest. But more importantly, to those lucky enough to have been in her radio and theatre audiences, the special contributions her music made toward enriching lives have guaranteed her position in her listener's hearts.

In January of 1976, Hildegard made a quiet re-debut at the Fargo Theatre playing a private concert for Red River Chapter members. This performance was on the original grand piano, and was presented in tandem with the Wurlitzer (which was played by young midwest organist Rob Letherer). Ala "James Family," the two provided a medley of great Gershwin tunes, concluding with the concerto sound of "Rhapsody In Blue."

Following the multi-media segment introducing Hildegard to the audience, M.C. Hamilton introduced the grand lady to the audience. Applause burst wildly across the auditorium and people leapt to their feet instantaneously as she entered escorted by Ted Larson. A long ovation necessitated her taking a bow even before she played her first notes!

Her opener was elegant. Hildegard has always used music the way

a poet uses words. Like Crawford, she can do more with two stops than most organists can do with twenty! Exquisite combinations on ballads are her forte; and the silence of her audience was marvelous as minute combinations sent her melodies soaring out of the chambers across her rapt audience. Upon her release of the last eloquent note, the audience actually sat quiet, not wanting to destroy the beauty of the moment. But the applause broke out, and another ovation became history!

Her programmed finale was "I'll See You In My Dreams," which was her signature tune years ago as she closed her pro broadcasts. The organ literally sang as she coaxed from it every melodic nuance possible — it was beautiful. And, with a slight pause, she played a poignant "Auld Lang Syne." As the last reverberant echoes faded away, the applause again broke out, and the entire audience gave her yet another standing ovation that went on wildly for several minutes. In a touching exit, she was escorted out of the orchestra pit and through the center aisle, surrounded by the audience who loved her music and her magic performance.

Often, celebrities are accorded great laurels in one era and disappear in the next, knowing that they could be celebrities only under the circumstances of one particular era. Perhaps some are granted status which is wholly undeserved. But in the case of Hildegarde, she is as great as ever! And, the instrument she played, truly *her* Wurlitzer, was in better voice now than it ever was in the past! If there was a great past for the Fargo Theatre and its pipe organ, then there is now assurance for an even greater future, thanks to people like Lance Johnson, Lloyd Collins and, of course, Hildegarde. Under the capable direction of Chapter Chairman David Knudson, youthful and energetic programs have inspired the membership to double! The chapter has purchased a three-manual Wurlitzer which is being enlarged to an ultimate twelve ranks, and will be installed where it can be heard by the public at regular intervals. The theatre organ is assured a place of prominence in the Midwest: Hope-Jones would be proud! □

'SAVE THE FOX' MAJOR FUND UNDER WAY

The first 18 months of operation of the Atlanta Fox Theatre as a performing arts auditorium have been solidly successful. A variety of attractions ranging from ballet, symphony orchestras, Broadway shows, organ concerts, to rock shows have played to large audiences. The theatre is operating in the black under the capable leadership of General Manager Ted Stevens and Technical Director Joe Patten (both ATOS members). The owner of the property, Atlanta Landmarks, Inc. has been able to meet interest payments on the 1.8 million dollar loan. But the principal amount will fall due in mid-1978. This amount will have to come from major grants and Landmarks is implementing a major drive to get this money in place. So far there is a challenge grant in the amount of \$400,000 from an anonymous donor to become available when 1.4 million in other grants is obtained. The showplace is operating efficiently with good patronage, but the most critical period in saving the historic landmark lies directly ahead.

Since the dark days of '75 when

the fate of the Atlanta Fox hung in the balance, local ATOS members have worked hard to contribute time, talent and effort in guiding tours, cleaning the theatre, repairing seats, decorating display areas, and most importantly sponsoring benefit performances. Indeed the December 1976 interest payment on the 1.8 million dollar loan could not have been met but for the \$10,000 accumulated by the chapter from benefits by Lyn Larsen, Dennis James and Bob Van Camp. The March payment was assured by a benefit (not ATOS sponsored) by Arthur Fiedler and the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. The next deadline is late June. The April 3 Keyboard Colossus — twelve grand pianos, harpsichord, 4/42 Moller organ all playing at the same time — is a major fund-raising effort. Organ concerts and possible silent movie series are under discussion. A souvenir record album featuring artists who have played the Fox; Lyn Larsen, Dolton McAlpin, Linda Kent, Ron Rice and house organist Bob Van Camp, has been assembled under local ATOS sponsorship. *The Many Moods of The Mighty Mo.* □

Closing Chord

William (Bill) Peterson, chairman of the Oregon Chapter, ATOS, passed away at his home in Portland Oregon, February 6, 1977. He was born in Hamilton, Montana, July 21, 1922 and came to Portland in 1941. Bill always had a keen interest in the movie palace and the theatre organ but didn't become actively involved until the early 1960's.

Bill served as co-chairman of the Western Regional ATOS convention in 1964 and the National Conventions of 1966 and 1973. He served one year as publications coordinator for ATOS and for many years authored the Acre of Seats column in THEATRE ORGAN. Bill was co-manager of two Portland theatres, the Oriental and the Colonial. He was also the motivating force behind



William Peterson

Gamba Records. Bill's occupation was also another hobby. He was director of the very successful Portland Roadster Show, a custom car exhibition. Bill Peterson is survived by a brother, sister-in-law, niece, and two nephews of Everett, Washington. □