

WE'VE GOT PROBLEMS

by John Muri

Isn't it wonderful to contemplate how an accumulation of inanimate matter like wood, metal, leather, and wind can be manipulated to produce melody, harmony, and spiritual delight? Sure. All the same, the theatre pipe organ, almost extinct as a movie utility, does not appear to have a placid future. Developments in electronics are mushrooming, and there are surprises in the making for us organ addicts. Within the year, we shall be seeing startling new electronic percussions on the market. Solid state relays are improving, and they will most likely become the standard installation.

The future of the theatre organ does not appear secure. In the past few years several important organ builders have closed up shop, with some of them in bankruptcy. Labor costs are high; you can't get people to work on organs for love and peanuts as we used to do. There are a few newcomers in the pipe-organ building field, but it is questionable how many of them will be able to compete with the electronics manufacturers.

Frequent reports of the purchase of organs all over the country (and their removal to Western states) stimulate speculation about what will happen to public interest in theatre instruments and particularly to the ATOS. There are very few cities with enough organs left to sponsor a theatre-convention. Gradually we are turning to pizzerias, skating rinks, electronic organs, and even churches for help in program-making. Transportation problems are becoming troublesome because of the long distances between instruments. Can we sustain interest in conventions that will need to be held in the same few cities year after year, particularly when they are held on the coasts, necessitating steadily rising travel and housing costs for the membership?

Our disappearing organs, a problem of gradual development, make up our number one problem. The destruction of theatres continued in

1976. We may have to go electronic, and that might not be too bad. It might even open up some new installations by managements who would not consider installing pipes, providing the prices of electronics descend as manufacturing efficiency rises.

The second problem is a more immediate one. For years altruistic people have been repairing and rebuilding theatre organs all over the country. Often they have put instruments into good working condition, sponsored a public concert or two, and then deserted the project. They do it for at least four reasons: (1) they get tired, (2) they want more time for their families, (3) they feel that the theatre management should assume care of maintenance, or (4) they have moved on to other projects. You can't blame them for not wanting to act as unpaid servicemen forever. Rarely do they get mention in concert programs. Consider the numerous devoted folk who handle ticket sales, clean dressing rooms, paint theatre interiors, scrub floors, and scrape chewing gum from seats. Some of us list their names in the printed programs, but we can also write stories about their activities (putting in human interest material and photos) and plant them in local newspapers. Then, too, we ought to consider ways in which on-going programs of regularly scheduled maintenance be established with some kind of support by theatre managements in the form of cash or the use of the theatre to make money for maintenance. Chapter meetings might well be devoted to consideration of the repetitive aspects of our work. Permanent service-agreements should be negotiated early in the development of a project.

Incidentally, we should encourage theatre-owners to place in charge of

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maintenance only those persons who have good reputations based on work that has been inspected by the best impartial judges available in the area. Amateurs in organ chambers can produce havoc. Some fellows would electrocute themselves trying to hook up a door-bell.

The stories one can tell! There is the guy who packed his pipes in a crate quite nicely, the small light ones on top of the big heavy ones, but who forgot to label the crate "This Side Up." Of course, the crate was shipped upside down, and the little pipes were mashed. Then there's the fellow who had the display Diapason pipes in his church painted. They were speaking pipes; so it was a big job cleaning the paint off and out of the mouths. There was a fellow in Detroit who wanted to remove a blower from a theatre. It wouldn't go through a padlocked side door, so he pushed against a pair of old backstage five by twelve-foot shipping doors weighing over eight hundred pounds each. The rusty hinges fell apart, the doors pivoted at the base and crashed into the alley. He took off in a hurry, without the blower.

There is a litter of amputated marimba and xylophone mallets, battered strings, diapasons and voxes strewn over the countryside. I have witnessed the removal of two organs in which spreader bars were yanked out. Bystanders were disgusted at the butchery.

Thoughtlessness can approach recklessness. I remember a fellow who bought a ten-ranker and got permission from a friend to store the organ in the basement of a large Chicago ballroom. The building was a thirty years old and had never flooded. Of course, you can guess what happened. The night after the organ had been neatly piled in the basement, torrential rain backed up the sewer, the first time in thirty years!

Some time ago I wrote a piece about respect for music. We still have a lot of people who insist on tinkering with organs without really knowing what they are doing. Let us hope for more understanding, just simple knowledge of the way an organ works before one starts tearing things apart or hooking things up without knowing what is going to happen. □