

heresy in atlanta

by James K. Jobson

Preserving a theatre organ for posterity is no small undertaking, regardless of how you look at it. But preserving an entire theatre that houses a monstrous 4/42 Moller is quite another thing. Atlanta Chapter decided long ago it would rather have the "Mighty Mo" right where it is than remove it to another location. That decision has led to efforts in all directions to raise money — lots of money. \$1.8 million, in fact. Just as politics has strange bedfellows, our dilemma has bred the oddity of all time — a *Piano* concert sponsored by an organ society!

There are few times in the lives of most of us when unusual elements fall into place at a given time to produce some beneficial circumstance. In our case, Atlanta Chapter has a member, John Clark McCall, Jr., who is employed in the Music Department of Georgia State University where one of the professors, Dr. Cary

Lewis, is a former student of world-renowned pianist Eugene List. List has long been known for his phenomenal keyboard artistry, and his teaching is reflected in Lewis' amazing technique.

It was a chance encounter between John McCall and Cary Lewis that brought up the subject of two so-called "monster concerts" Mr. List had put together in the past. One at Eastman School of Music drawing from the talent of staff and students, and the other at Radio City Music Hall in March, 1973 under somewhat the same conditions with the addition of E. Power Biggs at the Wurlitzer. In the first case, the concert was published by Columbia Records in SQ-Quad (No. MQ-31726). In the

second, the concert was produced by Columbia but no recording has thus far resulted.

In their casual conversation, McCall and Lewis pondered on whether a similar concert would be mounted in Atlanta, and if so, how? Upon reflection, they realized all the elements existed here to produce such a concert, but for the unknown factor of underwriting costs of advertising, artists' fees, union contracts, etc. After all, a state university has no reasonable basis on which to produce such a concert except as it will enhance the education of its students.

At this point, the executive committee of Atlanta Chapter was briefed on the possibility and asked if the chapter might present the concert at the Fox Theatre as a benefit. Those in that discussion were only vaguely aware of the magnitude of the venture. No one can know its enormity without having experienced

Above: John Demos, conductor, acknowledges the enthusiastic audience response to a rousing performance of Von Weber's overture to *Oberon* by the Colossus Company. (Tammy Ford Photo)

it. So, in all our naked innocence we agreed to mount the project provided the Music Department would supply the personnel and provided Mr. List could be placed under contract as the headline attraction. They would, and he could! Many phone calls, including some overseas where Mr. List was touring, brought agreement on a date the theatre would be available and which would be suitable to the performers — April 3, 1977. That gave us only 105 days to assemble the program, prepare additional music arrangements, recruit personnel, scrounge 12 grand pianos (in addition to the 3 at the Fox), design and produce advertising, decorate show windows at the theatre and arrange for media coverage. With an \$8 top on ticket prices, about 1200 patrons were needed to break even. We had drawn almost twice that number for organ concerts, so there was little worry about ticket sales. We counted heavily on the population of piano students and teachers. And after all, with 60 performers on stage, their family tickets would insure against loss!

And so this is how it came to pass the Atlanta Chapter sponsored a *piano* concert. But it was not *totally* a pianoforte extravaganza. In the program at Radio City, E. Power Biggs had played some organ solos. Our program would integrate theatre organ into some piano selections. Ronald Rice, who teaches organ at GSU had previously played the Fox Moller and it was love on the first note. Bob Van Camp would participate, and agreed to arrange a couple of Scott Joplin numbers for organ/piano performance. Rice arranged a Paisiello concerto for harpsichord, with the orchestral parts transcribed for theatre organ. The finale was "Stars and Stripes Forever" arranged by Rice for organ based on Morton Gould's version for pianos. In addition, Rice included a classic organ solo and teamed with Bob Van Camp to present P.D.Q. Bach's "Toot Suite" to give the audience a taste of the versatility of a theatre organ.

When the program was finally worked out, only one number duplicated the recorded Monster Concert — the Shultz-Evler/Chasins arrangements of Johann Strauss' "Blue Danube." Louis Moreau Gottschalk,

the granddaddy of all piano monster concerts in the 1850's, was well represented with "Printemps d'amour," "The Siege of Zaragosa," "The Banana Tree" and his arrangements of Von Weber's overture to *Oberon*. One of the most charming pieces on the bill was Victor Savant's reconstruction of the "Siege of Zaragosa." This performance was a premiere in America from fragments discovered in Europe, the final movement having been completed only two days prior to public performance! Mr. Savant flew from Cincinnati to participate in the program.

The logistics of such a program are incredible. Various music arrangements require a variety of players. For example, one selection may use one pianist at each of 10 pianos; another may be scored for 20 pianists at 10 pianos. Arrangements also had to be conformed to the physical layout on the stage to prevent an imbalance in sound. John McCall, producer and Cary Lewis, musical director, worked out these details well in advance of on-location rehearsal at the Fox.

Between Tuesday and Saturday mornings prior to the Sunday performance, Rich's Department Store delivered 12 grand pianos, including the two new Bosendorfer concert grands, one of which was a \$36,000 Imperial. The remainder were Stein-

way concert grands and Kimballs, augmented by the house pianos, two Baldwins and a Steinway concert grand. Rich's not only loaned the pianos, but provided transportation both ways and tuning, all at no cost. Theirs is the only Bosendorfer Imperial in the western hemisphere available for concert rental!

Rehearsals began at 10 a.m. Tuesday and were interrupted by other shows in the theatre until Saturday when another session from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. completed rehearsals of performance, staging and lighting. Touch-up tuning and final rehearsal was scheduled for noon Sunday until the house opened at 2 p.m. Performance began at 3 p.m.

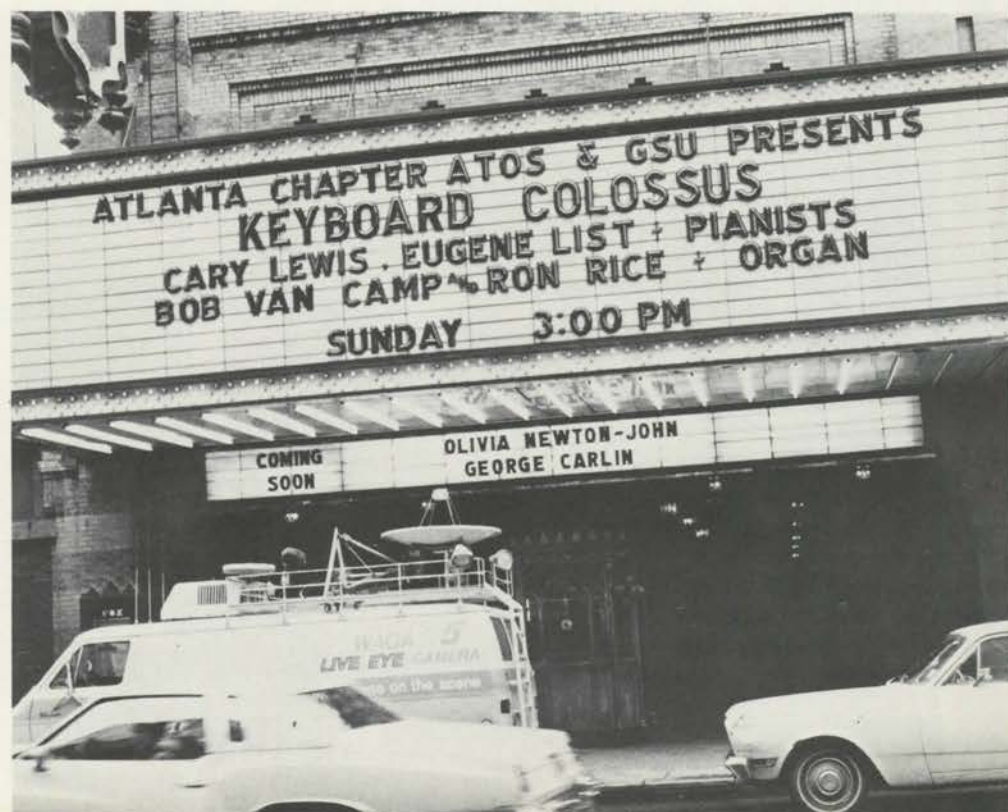
Performing personnel included 30 pianists, one harpsichordist and one organist from GSU faculty and alumni, plus Mr. List, Bob Van Camp and conductor John Demos. In addition, 26 GSU students were used in the two Scott Joplin numbers assisted by Bob Van Camp.

All the performers from GSU donated their services. Union members were paid scale, but unanimously endorsed their checks to the Fox Benefit Fund. Mr. List generously performed at a substantially reduced fee.

A most unusual aspect of this affair was the smoothness with which rehearsals and presentation took

House Organist Bob Van Camp is convinced the Keyboard Colossus was the most fantastic and elaborate entertainment ever staged at the Fabulous Fox, April 3, 1977. TV coverage was by Channel 5's "Live Eye."

(GA. State Univ. Photo)



place. It is almost unheard of to assemble 60 musicians and maintain harmony among the personalities. But there are no "prima donnas" in the GSU Music Department. It was complete cooperation and subordination of personal ego throughout to produce some of the most fruitful rehearsals and polished performances one could imagine. This was due in great measure to the skill in John Demos, conductor *par excellence*, who in real life is assistant professor of music and conductor of the GSU Band. There was some nervous anticipation of Mr. List's arrival only two days prior to the performance. Perhaps he might have different musical ideas. But no. He is the most charming and unassuming of all star performers — almost to the point of condescension. He was "one of the family" from the moment he arrived.

The result of all this organization and effort? Well, John McCall is now known as John *Gottschalk* McCall! Atlanta has discovered it has in Cary Lewis a solo pianist second to none, with particular facility in the technically demanding Gottschalk literature. John Demos is now a conductor to be reckoned in the top echelon. The GSU Music Department was given a showcase in the city it serves to display faculty, students and a high degree of scholarship. Atlanta Chapter had a ball. We worked like h---, but in that our group thrives. And no one enjoyed the dramatic staging of 15 pianos, harpsichord and organ on an 80 x 38 foot stage with five lifts any more than chapter members.

And how did the performance go? We do not have a qualified critical opinion since Atlanta newspapers' music critic was performing! The audience was obviously entranced. When that huge Moller console rises from the depths, bathed in a solo spot, Atlanta audiences sit quietly and pay attention, for they know pure musical ecstasy will be theirs. But the most dramatic moment came with the second selection, the overture to *Oberon*. The house was dark. The orchestra lift came into view with five concert grands and the conductor, individually spotlighted, as the music developed, the state curtain parted to reveal two additional pianos in front of a scrim lighted with red, white and blue



Eugene List, world-renowned concert artist who records for Columbia, Vanguard and Turnabout. List is known for organizing "monster concerts" of which the Keyboard Colossus is by far the largest and most elaborate.

spots. Further musical development was followed by raising the scrim to reveal four more individually spot lighted concert grands. Later in the selection the final three grands were lighted on the rear lift, revealing the entire complement of instruments and performers. The audience appeared too overcome to respond within the selection as the scene unfolded, but burst into thunderous applause at the finale. It was a respectful and highly appreciative audience of about 3,000 patrons who simply could not restrain themselves when, in the development of Gottschalk's "Banjo," the strains of "Dixie" could be detected.

The concert performance was professionally taped for delayed broadcast on WABE-FM stereo on April 30, 1977 at 9 p.m. A highlight disc recording can be made available to ATOS members provided demand is sufficient to defray expenses plus union recording payments. You may make your wishes known (no money yet, please) by writing to the chapter at P.O. Box 76404, Atlanta, GA 30328. While this is a "live" concert recording, the performance is unique.

Oh, yes! The box office. On a rainy, dreary day with dire predictions from the Weather Office, ticket sales filled over 3/4 of the house, with

a net of some \$8,000 after expenses toward saving the "Mighty Mo."

Closing Chord

E. Power Biggs, world-renowned concert organist, died March 10. He was 70.

Born in Westcliff, England, he received his education in Hurstpierpont College and the Royal Academy of Music. Coming to the United



E. Power Biggs