

John Hammond

MASTER ORGANIST

by Lloyd E. Klos

Awhile back, we learned that the widow of former theatre organist, John Hammond, is living in Bogalusa, Louisiana. With the assistance of ATOS member Howard Jackson, we were put in contact with Mrs. Hammond, who offered to supply background information on the life of this Hall of Fame organist.

This, then, is the story of John F. Hammond, master organist.

Born in Hempstead, Long Island, in 1894, his paternal grandmother was a fine concert pianist, and gave him his first piano lesson when he was six. Learning very fast, and showing remarkable aptitude, he then studied under an uncle, William G. Hammond, a choir director and organist in a large Brooklyn church.

John's parents vehemently opposed their son becoming a musician. His engineer father, and his mother, an operator of a business school, thought music inferior to their choice of vocation for him — doctor. He did attend medical school, but quit in this junior year, having studied organ on the side. One of his standing jokes was, "It's a good thing I dropped out of med school; I would only have made the undertakers wealthy."

So, music won out; it was his prime interest throughout his life. He studied organ under Frank

Wright, at that time, warden of the AGO and one of the guild examiners. Later, under the same instructor, John completed a thorough course in musical theory.

Though gaining credit through ability as organist and choirmaster in three Brooklyn churches, he soon became aware that the theatre offered a broader and more lucrative field. There being no school for motion picture organists in the early days of the profession, the only road to success lay through actual experience of the most disheartening kind. The way to advance was to hold a position long enough to learn all there was to be learned, and then move on to another theatre.

John Hammond was first employed as organist at New York's Vitagraph Theatre. With great anticipation, he looked forward to his first evening performance. He very carefully chose an opening number





John Hammond poses for a 1924 publicity photo at the console of the Piccadilly Theatre's 4/28 Marr & Colton in New York. *(Harold Jolles collection)*

which would be impressive, since he assumed there'd be a full house. Everything was ready and at the appointed moment, he played the opening chords with great gusto. But when he observed the size of the audience, "my pride fell like a punctured balloon. There were but three persons in the theatre!"

He then served successively at the National Theatre in Jersey City; Claremont, Strand and Broadway theatres in New York; and the Strand Theatre in Brooklyn where he was to remain for two-and-a-half years. During his tenure at the Strand, he was instrumental in organizing the New York Society of Theatre Organists and served as president for two terms.

In August, 1922, Arthur Alex-

ander, musical director of Rochester's new Eastman Theatre, announced the appointment of two organists for the theatre and for teaching organ in the Eastman School of Music. They were Dezso von D'Antalfy of New York's Capitol Theatre, and John Hammond.

The \$5 million Eastman Theatre, "Dedicated to the Enrichment of Community Life," possessed what was described in glowing press releases, "The world's largest theatre organ." It was a 4-manual, 155-stop Austin, and it was always regrettable that the pipes weren't situated in chambers on either side of the proscenium, rather than in their backstage location. As a result, they had to speak through the orchestra

backdrop and curtains. The organ was used primarily with the orchestra in motion picture accompaniment.

The adjacent Kilbourn Hall, used for student recitals and chamber music, had (still does) a 4-manual Aeolian-Skinner. In a large room on one of the upper floors of the theatre, was housed a 2/8 Wurlitzer, and this was employed for instruction and practice in the art of silent movie accompaniment, using a film library, a screen and projection equipment. Advanced students were given the opportunity to play the Austin in the theatre, thereby gaining practical experience. There were 11 other practice studios for classical organ study; nine with 2-manual organs and two with 3-manual instruments.

This was the scene which John Hammond entered late in 1922. From all reports, he was an excellent musician and a fine teacher. Rosa Rio, who studied under him at the Eastman, says: "He was an excellent teacher and inspired all who studied with him. He loved music dearly and was by far superior to Jesse Crawford as a musician, but never cared for fame or money."

In August, 1923, the 16th annual convention of the National Association of Organists was held in Rochester. Focal points of the sessions were the Eastman Theatre and the School of Music. Mr. Hammond played a leading role in this affair, demonstrating motion picture accompaniment and acting as a host of the event. (See April 1972 THEATRE ORGAN.)

In July, 1924, he accepted the post as organist at the new Piccadilly Theatre at Broadway and 52nd Street in New York. Installed was a \$60,000 4/28 Marr & Colton, the largest that firm ever built. The theatre opened in September.

Selection of Mr. Hammond was made after a nationwide survey of theatre organists. While he was reluctant to leave his position in Rochester, the offer was so financially attractive, he couldn't refuse it. His selection was considered a tribute to the high calibre of the Eastman faculty. The man who succeeded him at the Eastman, was Harold Osborn Smith, the same organist who took Mr. Hammond's place at the Brooklyn Strand when

the latter went to Rochester.

At the Piccadilly, Mr. Hammond was featured in a recital every noon. For a time in 1925, his recitals were broadcast over WGBS, New York. In short, John Hammond was fast becoming one of New York's leading theatre organists. In the February 15, 1925 issue of *The Metronome*, appeared an article by him entitled "Making a Box Office Attraction of the Theatre Organist," and since we believe it as important in today's renaissance of the theatre organ as it was in 1925, we reprint it here:

"The theatre-going public in New York City presents to the motion picture organist, problems which are not to be met with elsewhere. This condition is due to many circumstances. In the first place, the cosmopolitan aspect of the city is more pronounced than in any other section of the country. Then, there is a predominance of excellent orchestral music to be found on Broadway. The New York public has been educated to consider the orchestra of primary importance, relegating the organ to a very subordinate position. Furthermore, the instruments have not been located with a view to exploitation from a showman's standpoint. Consoles are placed where it is difficult for the organist to be seen, and the organ chambers are put in positions from which tonal egress is limited, if not almost entirely obstructed. Finally, we have the battle for supremacy between the straight organ and the unit orchestra, a question which the organists have tried to decide for years, but which the public will eventually decide without any fuss whatsoever.

"It will be readily seen from the foregoing statements that he who would put himself in a place of prominence by performing on a theatre organ in the neighborhood of the white lights has what might be termed a "helluva chance" (which is colloquial for a "tough time"). How is it possible to develop a real interest in the organ on Broadway? The writer will probably be accused of egotism on account of frequent references in this article to his experiences. He occupies the singular position of being the sole featured organist on Broadway at the present time. By featured organist is meant one whose solos are

not placed in the exit-march category. Consequently, it is necessary to refer frequently to the work and observations of the writer.

"It is almost an axiom in this day of soap advertisements and publicity men to say that the curiosity and interest of the public must be aroused by special efforts if sales are to be made. An appeal must be made to all the senses which the human organism possesses. One would think that music depended entirely upon the ear for its reception, and such is indeed the case, but what about the interpreter? Who receives the salary — the music, the organ or the organist? The answer is quite obvious. We have, therefore, not to sell music; our product is the organist, and his music and instrument are but two of the points in our ballyhoo.

"An organist has no auricular appeal per se. He can be seen, however, and it is largely through vision that his personality registers. One of the first requisites, then, is the matter of visibility. Unless the audience can see the organist readily from all parts of the auditorium, there is little chance that his personality will create an impression. Let us suppose that the organist is in a suitable location for vision, what next? The attention of the audience must be concentrated upon him. This can be done by lighting and motion, or to use the

photo-dramatic term, 'action.'

"Here, the console elevator comes into play — the rising console is a certain attention-arrester. The lighting is of utmost importance; the spotlight must not be too glaring and must also reveal the console in order that the actual manipulation may be under observation. It is of equal importance that the surrounding house lighting be of such a quality and character as not to distract attention from the performer. Next in the order of importance is the visible performance. In this, we must be guided by good taste between the Scilla of ludicrous acrobatics and the Charybdis of uninteresting rigidity. The organist must become an actor even as the orchestra conductor, and every move be calculated to produce a reaction upon his audience. Likewise, he must remember that a naturally pleasant facial expression and an easy manner when facing the audience for applause are valuable assets in the creation of a public demand. All of the above remarks apply to the rendition of solo numbers in a cinema theatre; this branch of the work being obviously the only spot on the program where personal appearance is possible. It is worthy of note, dear reader, that I have as yet mentioned neither the organ nor the music to be rendered.

"From the audience standpoint,

A publicity picture of John Hammond. The organ is not identified, but judging from the console light, it is a Kimball, and could be the one in Brooklyn's Mark Strand Theatre where he played in 1926. (Hammond collection)



given an organ of reasonably good tone (preferably one possessing interesting solo stops), the console is the most important part of the instrument. Here we are again confronted with the specter of visibility. A console with stop keys located on side panels or one with the stops arranged in straight, parallel rows above the top manual, is poorly laid out for display purposes. In the case of the former, the angle of vision is bad, while the body of the organist almost entirely obscures the stops of the latter. The practice of placing the console on an elevator is a good one from two standpoints. In the first place, the motion of the rising console, as previously explained, is an advantage, while the elevated position enables the entire console to be on display, as well as the foot work of the performer. The crescentic arrangement of the stop keys seems to be the best type for the purpose of display as is evidenced by the fact that the most prominent of theatre organ designers are practically unanimous in its adoption.

"A word now as to the location of the organ chambers. Broadway has been singularly unfortunate in having either back-stage installations where any scenery immediately wrecks the tone, or a relation between organ and console which renders it virtually impossible for the organist to judge the performance which he is attempting. To obtain anything like satisfactory results, it is imperative that the organ chambers open directly into the auditorium proper, and that the console be placed in the auditorium proper, where the organist can hear himself as others hear him."

As was the case with prominent theatre organists in those days, their pictures appeared on covers of sheet music which the organists used on their programs. John Hammond was no exception. Among the song sheets having his picture were those of "Whispering Eyes," "Down Moonlight Lane" and "Back Where the Daffodils Grow," all in 1924; "Little Love Notes" in 1925 and "For Heaven's Sake" in 1926, the last being inspired by the Harold Lloyd picture of the same name. The notation appears, "Introduced by John Hammond, organist, now at the Piccadilly Theatre, New York."

In late 1926, Hammond had a stint at the Mark Strand Theatre in Brooklyn and Dr. Edward J. Bebko (Eddie Baker), remembers being introduced to him by mutual friend Raul de Toledo Galvao (Paul Brass). Hammond was first organist at the Strand, and Galvao was his assistant. Galvao introduced him as the "organists' organist." Hammond spoke in glowing terms of the Strand's 3/22 Kimball: "It has the best qualities of a concert organ and the beauty of a theatre organ."

In early 1927, the multi-million dollar 3,400-seat Saenger Theatre opened in New Orleans. This was a John Ebersohn-designed house, the atmospheric variety, where on the ceiling, friendly stars twinkled and wisps of clouds floated by. Mrs. Hammond provided a letter which her husband had written to a friend in 1970, and describes some of his experiences at the Saenger. It is so amusingly written that we reproduced excerpts of it here:

"The Saenger Theatre opened in 1927. That's 43 years ago. Henry Ford's Model A had just hit the market and some crazy guy was preparing to launch a contraption designed to make the movies talk. Of course, such a ridiculous invention was impossible; Tom Edison had tried it years earlier, and if he couldn't do it, no one could. But, someone did!

"But, to return to the opening of

the Saenger. In a day when Paramount Pictures operated on the principle of lush and extravagant theatres to offset mediocre (or worse) entertainment, the Saenger was the last word. The architecture was authentic Barnum and Bailey, a Hollywood (synonymous with Heaven in them days) version of an open-air garden with stars in the sky, complete even to the clouds moving majestically across the vaulted plaster heavens.

"My particular domain was, of course, the organ. In one particular, the Saenger was a maverick; originally, it was to be the prize jewel in the Saenger Circuit crown. Sometime during its construction, it became part of the Paramount harem, but in one particular, the union was not legitimate. Any true inmate of the Paramount Seraglio was automatically required to boast (?) of a large Wurlitzer organ. The Saenger, as become a true Southern Belle (ergo, a genuine rebel), was equipped with a very fine Robert Morton organ.

"No theatre organist in 1927 could know that we were even then singing our swan song and that we were about to become a vanishing race. Yet, in two short years, Al Jolson in The Jazz Singer sounded the death-knell of the theatre organist. In that brief duration, however, my beloved Robert Morton was able to furnish some excellent background music for the old silents, prostitute itself by

John Hammond at the Austin in the Strand Theatre in Brooklyn about 1921. He played in this theatre about 2½ years. (Hammond collection)



leading 'audience sings,' and render a definite service to the cause of good music by presenting Sunday organ programs, contemptuously endured by the management, but remembered to this day by that generation of New Orleans citizens who came to the theatre early on Sundays so as not to miss the organ concert.

"The Saenger had been in operation but a few months when disaster struck. A torrential downpour one night flooded the city. The show at the theatre had been over but a short time, and I was in my dressing room under the stage when suddenly the water, which had, unknown to us, piled up against the windows at sidewalk level, suddenly burst through and proceeded to flood the orchestra and console pit. The console elevator had been lowered for the night and was threatened by the sudden rush of the water.

"I raced through the rapidly rising flood and reached for the elevator button. Wonder of wonders! It still operated and just long enough for the console to rise all the way. Then, the water shorted the wiring and all power was cut off. The console and cable were not damaged, but the first 30 rows of seats in the auditorium were completely wrecked. It took a couple months for the musty odor to dissipate and for new seats and carpet to be installed. In the meantime, I was forced to play in one of the smaller houses on whatever was there.

"I also recall the time when we installed a Howard Organ Seat. As you know, it was divided with a portion for each leg, each part moving with its respective leg. It also had a comfortable back rest which was a swell idea. But unfortunately, my assistant, a long, tall and rather thin girl sat on the seat. The halves parted company and deposited her in a heap on the pedalboard, resulting in a tumult of protest from the pedal division. And I do mean tumult!

"I also recall the time that I was playing a transcription of the 'Preislied' from Die Meistersinger at one of my Sunday programs. Suddenly, a very audible titter from my audience reached my ears. When anything like that happens, one is immediately concerned about personal matters. Has some part of his clothing become torn or disarrang-



Mr. Hammond was a licensed pilot in the days when one flew "by the seat of his pants." He is shown (center), about 1927, ready to take off — once the plane gets out of the hangar! (Hammond collection)

ed? I could feel the color rising and the perspiration starting as I tried to check the situation without stopping 'Preislied.' Suddenly, I looked at the stage, and there at the exact center, a completely indifferent black cat sat and contentedly licked its paws. To add insult to injury, the darned animal cast a bored look in my direction, yawned cavernously and slowly stalked off (exit, stage right, as Snagglepuss would say). It was too much! I stopped the music and joined the audience in a good laugh!

"Of all the theatres which I played during my years as a movie organist, the Saenger is the only one of which I have not a single photo of any aspect of it. I had a scrapbook of press notices, but a diligent search has not brought it to light. My wife and I have ransacked the joint in vain."

It should be mentioned here that Mr. Hammond was a licensed airplane pilot as far back as 1927. He was also interested in automobiles, having owned at various times a one-cylinder Cadillac, Haynes-Asperson, Stutz Bearcat, Willys Overland, Studebaker, Flint, Model T Ford, several Chryslers and a Dodge. He never had an accident, but once was stopped for driving ten in Brooklyn's Prospect Park. "I was just a kid, had stolen my dad's car to take a ride, and didn't know that the speed limit in Prospect Park was eight miles an hour!"

The Saenger in New Orleans was the "flagship" of the Saenger chain

of 89 theatres in six states. It had an orchestra platform and the orchestra was conducted by Castro Carazo. Top stage shows were booked and great conductors were billed for weeks at a time, including Ben Black, Art Landry, Ben Bernie, Ted Lewis, Lou Forbes and others.

Mr. Hammond's assistant organist at the Saenger was Ray McNamara, a local musician and "tops in both organ and piano," according to Rosa Rio, who also played the Saenger. She played duets with John, before and after the slave console was installed. Sometimes, she played piano on stage while Hammond played the organ. Under the pseudonym of John Hassel, Hammond made a few records for Columbia, Diva, Harmony and Velvet Tone. Anybody remember these labels? According to the Doner Record List, Hammond used a Wurlitzer in New Orleans, and the recordings were made in 1927-28.

John Hammond served as Saenger organist for three years. Sound had come to the fore in movies, and vaudeville was on the way out. Use of the organ had become minimal, so he pursued other interests. He bought an accordion and began to play in night clubs to make a living, the depression having set in, but he did not particularly care for this facet of show business. However, he had to eat. He had no car at this time, so had to walk a considerable distance to work. One day, two men in a car offered him a lift, and upon



Following his theatre organ days, John Hammond played in churches and on radio. Here he accompanies singer Janis George at the piano over a Detroit station. (Detroit News Photo)

being told John's occupation, the driver pulled the car off the road and stopped. It developed that the two were traveling Evangelists.

One said, "Brother, the Lord has given you too much talent for you to use like this. We're going to pray for you right now, and then take you to your destination. But, don't play another night in the clubs. The Lord is going to give you some decent work soon." John was offered money to tide him over until the favorable job arrived.

He never saw the men again, but took their advice. Three days later, he met a friend who offered him a small part in the play *The Farmer's Daughter*, starring Henry Fonda. John often said that this whole affair was a turning point of his life.

Believed to be the last photo of John Hammond, it was taken in August 1972 when he played the organ in the Perkins Chapel on the S.M.U. campus in Dallas, Texas. (Hammond collection)



In this play, a scene required Fonda to hit John. In the process, Fonda slipped and really hung one on his adversary!

Another scene called for John to play the accordion, but the Musicians' Union insisted on union scale which the director couldn't pay. It was decided that John would play the harmonica, which wasn't considered a musical instrument, so he spent an evening learning to play it for the rehearsal next day.

Hammond then became a church organist in New York. When the Hammond electronic came to the fore in 1935, he became the New York sales manager. Though he maintained that he was a distant cousin of Laurens Hammond, the organ's inventor, John used an alias when working for that company so that the customers wouldn't comment on the similarity of names.

Former Roxy Theatre and Radio City Music Hall organist, Dr. C. A. J. Parmentier remembers John Hammond. "I used to see him occasionally in the early twenties when we had get-togethers for the New York Society of Theatre Organists. When he became the head of the Hammond offices in the greater New York area around 1936, it was he who engaged me as a salesman. He was always on my side in our discussions with the powers-that-be concerning improvements, policies, and promotion of the Hammond. Also, John prevailed on the Chicago headquarters that I play a series of Hammond organ commercial programs over WQXR in New York.

"I remember quite well that whenever prospects or buyers would come into the Hammond studios, they would invariably say, 'This is a remarkable instrument, but suppose you have to fill a big church, hall or auditorium?' Our stock answer was, 'Why, we could fill Madison Square Garden (organ volume-wise).' This eventually annoyed me.

"I am sorry I don't remember any anecdotes, but I can tell you John Hammond was a wonderful guy, a truly great personality with plenty of kindness thrown in."

After his years in New York, he spent time as a church organist in Chicago and Detroit. *Detroit News* clips, dated November 16, 1940, contained praise of his music played on the carillon on Belle Isle.

In 1944, he moved permanently to Bogalusa, La., where he served as organist, choirmaster and minister of music of the E.S.M. United Methodist Church until his death. In addition to his church work, he also taught instrumental music and voice.

Still interested in the legitimate theatre, he encouraged the Mill Town Players which were an outgrowth of a group which met at Hammond's home to read plays. A full-scale little-theatre group was the result, and he directed its first effort, *You Can't Take It With You*. He acted in and directed a series of plays for 16 years.

Active in the Masonic order, John Hammond was a Shriner and a member of the Order of Amaranth. He died in Bogalusa in October, 1972.

Mrs. Hammond says: "As a musician, he was a master of improvisation. He felt that when one sits on an organ bench for six hours on end, you have to do **something**, and he could do anything with a pipe organ! His memory was fantastic. No matter what type music one asked him to play, he could do it from memory: A Bach prelude, an aria from a Wagnerian opera, show tunes, pop tunes. He often said he could play from memory a thousand selections, but could forget a loaf of bread at the store.

"He was a marvelous man to know, as well as being a great musician. Young in heart, and remaining very active until he died, he had a great sense of humor and always looked on the bright side of things."

It is regrettable that the writer didn't learn of John Hammond's address until too late to correspond with him. However, we thank Mrs. Hammond for her cooperation, for without it, this story would have been impossible.

Fittingly, we quote Mrs. Hammond's remarks for the end of our story. "He was a man whose music touched deeply all who heard it. It was as though the music came from Heaven, and he was the instrument through which it was sent." □

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