

Organ Enthusiasts Save Theatre

by Henry B. Aldridge

For the past eight years, the three-manual, thirteen-rank Barton pipe organ in Ann Arbor's Michigan Theatre has been one of the busiest theatre organs in the nation. Played by a staff of three regular house organists, it has been heard every Friday and Saturday night since November, 1972, and, in addition, has been used for monthly open houses of the Motor City Chapter of ATOS, concerts, and silent film accompaniments. This constant exposure has resulted in a strong public support of both the instrument and the building in which it is housed. Had it not been for this support, both organ and theatre might be gone by now.

Back in 1970, members of the Motor City Chapter, headed by Ben Levy, John Minick and David Lau, began work on the organ's restoration. The instrument had been severely damaged by water and had not been played regularly for several years. The restoration was completed in June of 1972, and, after a preview concert by Rick Shindell of Toledo, the organ was featured in its first public performance with Lyn Larsen in October of that year.

The restored instrument could have been reserved only for special concerts or private performances, but an unusual decision by Ann Arbor members of the Motor City Chapter led to the many years of public appearances which made the Michigan Theatre's Barton famous. Shortly after the Larsen concert of 1972, it was decided that the instrument should become a regular part of the theatre's life. With the full cooperation of manager Gerry Hoag, the organ was regularly scheduled for a ten-minute public performance during the intermission separating the 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. film showing

every Friday and Saturday night.

In the beginning, John Fischer and Larry Gleason of Detroit took on the job of playing these intermissions, but it soon became apparent that the long drive from Detroit, especially in bad weather, was too much to ask even of loyal volunteers! The search then went out for Ann Arbor organists who could meet the demands of a regular playing schedule.

Soon three local organists were found. They were Rupert Otto, a teacher in Ann Arbor's Pioneer High School; Newton Bates, a local real estate broker; and the writer. From November of 1972 until August 4, 1979, we played the Barton every Friday and Saturday night of the year and sometimes more often than that. We were ably assisted during these years by Greg Yassick, Don Haller, Larry Cass, and sometimes Dennis James. Over 800 intermissions were played on the Barton and only a

handful were missed because of illness, an organ malfunction, or a mistake in scheduling. Such a record makes the Michigan Theatre's Barton one of the most regularly used theatre pipe organs in the world.

Use of the Barton for intermissions was similar to that of the big Wurlitzer at Radio City Music Hall, except not as often. One of the organists would determine the key of the music at the end of the film and pass the information along to the others. Whenever appropriate, the organist would "cue" the picture (play in under the closing music) and bring the instrument up to solo level on its Barton four-poster lift. The projectionist always lit one of the theatre's two carbon-arc follow spots and delighted us by changing the colors of the beam to fit the mood of our musical selections. The manager stood in the lobby and kept an eye on the incoming crowd. When

Michigan Theatre on Liberty Street. Fall, 1978.





(L to R) House organists: Henry B. Aldridge, Rupert Otto, Newton Bates, February, 1979.
(The Ann Arbor News Photo — Larry E. Wright)

the line at the concession stand had diminished sufficiently in length, he would telephone the projectionist to buzz the organist. When the signal came, the organist usually had sixty seconds or so to finish his performance. Otto often closed out his intermission with a theme from Gordon Jenkins' *Manhattan Tower* while Bates used "Goodnight, Sweetheart." I usually stuck to the University of Michigan fight song, "Hail to the Victors."

The appearance of the organ at the end of the 7 o'clock show was eagerly anticipated. Many members of the audience would stay over just to hear the organ and enthusiasts would regularly cluster about the console for a closer look and listen. Many out-of-town visitors from New York were delighted to find a "Radio City" treat in Ann Arbor.

Over the years, we had our share of drunks and name-callers, but they were rare. On one occasion, a young lady was so taken by the music that she did an impromptu interpretive dance in the aisle. The organist was unaware of the activity until after his intermission was over.

Aside from seeing the endings of hundreds of films, the organists gained for themselves an experience shared by very few theatre organists — that of playing regularly before a theatre-going audience. They, and the maintenance staff of Ben Levy, Grant Cook, Jean Hicks, and David Lau had the chance to share in the ongoing life of a motion picture theatre — a situation reserved for very few theatre organ enthusiasts these days. It was the commitment and

hard work of these people which formed the basis of strength which made possible the eventual salvation of the pipe organ and the Michigan Theatre itself.

In 1975, a new shopping center opened in Ann Arbor. It contained four mini-theatres and their effect upon the venerable Michigan was devastating. At the same time, veteran manager Gerry Hoag retired. Without his loving care, the theatre began to slip. Weekend crowds dwindled to the point that organists would sometimes play to no more than twenty-five people. Nevertheless, the organ intermission tradition continued without interruption.

In the summer of 1978, members of ATOS in Ann Arbor heard rumors that the Michigan's tenants for fifty years, the W.S. Butterfield Company, were planning to close the theatre. It was also learned that the nearby State Theatre was to be divided into four smaller theatres and that the Michigan's pipe organ (owned by the Butterfield Company) might be removed to another of their theatres in the state. The owners of the Michigan Theatre building itself, the Poulos family of Ann Arbor, were supposedly drawing up plans to convert the 1800-seat house into a shopping mall after Butterfield moved out.

Acting on a confirmation of these rumors, in November, 1978, members began to explore ways to save the Michigan Theatre and its pipe organ. Preliminary talks with interested community leaders and representatives of the Poulos family and

Organ Superstars The Most Unique Organ Collection Ever Published!

- ★ Containing 16 Organ Solos, Each Personally Selected And Arranged By One Of The World's Greatest Organists.
- ★ Features A Photo And Biography On Each Superstar.
- ★ Intermediate To Advanced Level.
- ★ Spiral Bound For Easy Page Turns.

Includes:

ROSEMARY BAILEY
Amazing Grace &
Jesu, Joy Of Man's Desiring

EDDIE BAXTER
Here's That Rainy Day

RICHARD BRADLEY
Early Autumn

CHAMP CHAMPAGNE
Midnight Sun

JACKIE DAVIS
Serenade For Sara

ROGER GAUDET
Feelings

JOHNNY KEMM
Alley Cat

DON KINGSTON
Chicken Polka

MARK LAUB
Chanson D'Amour

EDDIE LAYTON
America &
America The Beautiful

BOB RALSTON
Watch What Happens

ROSA RIO
Yes Sir! That's My Baby

EDNA SCANLAN
As Long As He Needs Me

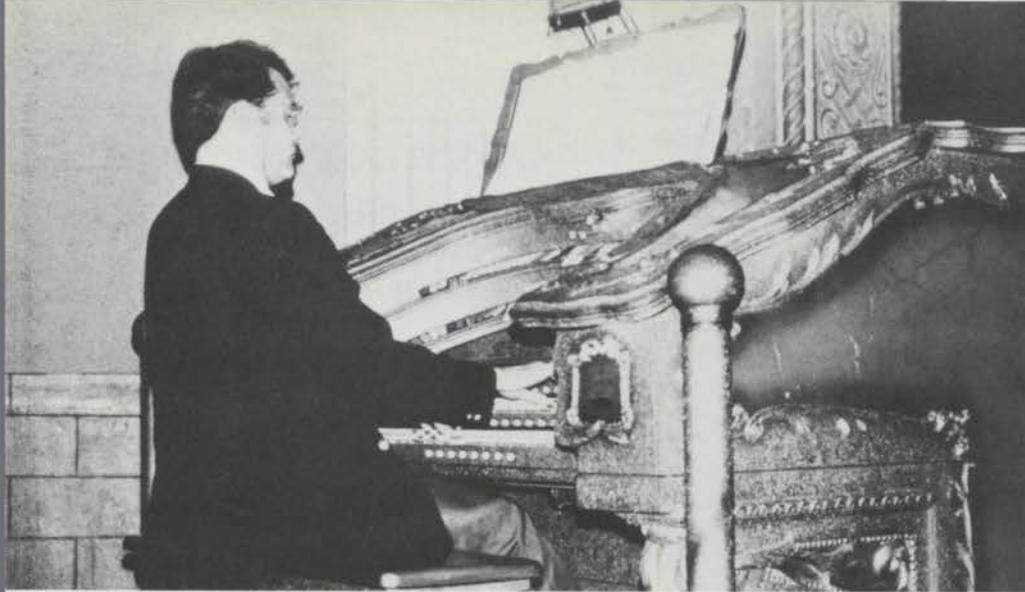
SHIRLEY SCOTT
Blues Everywhere

NELSON VARON
Polka Dots And Moonbeams

BILL WORRALL
El Bimbo

Please send me ___ Organ Superstar(s)
\$6.95 each plus \$1.00 for postage
and handling. (NJ residents add sales tax.)

Make Check or Money Order payable
to:
RBR Communications, Inc.
Dept. ATOS-1
397 Haledon Avenue
Haledon, NJ 07508
Sorry, no C.O.D.'s.



Organist Henry Aldridge plays his last intermission on August 1, 1979, for *The Sound of Music* just a few days before the theatre closed as an operating movie house.

Butterfield quickly revealed the enormous difficulties we faced. We learned that a disorganized group of impoverished enthusiasts does not constitute a negotiating unit. We also saw that what lay ahead of us was two separate negotiations, one for the building and one for the fixtures including the organ. We might end up with a theatre and no pipe organ.

In February, 1979, Mayor Louis D. Belcher persuaded the Ann Arbor City Council to release \$2,000 of general funds to pay for the formation of the Michigan Community Theatre Foundation, Inc. which would negotiate for purchase of building and organ. The Mayor's commitment gave hope and direction to our cause.

Meanwhile, the organ became the focal point of publicity efforts. School children were invited to hear

the instrument for possibly the last time, and a sympathetic *Ann Arbor News* published a lengthy Sunday feature on the intermission organists. Throughout all of this, intermission performances continued and helped to publicize the uniqueness of the Michigan Theatre and its pipe organ.

Meanwhile, negotiations between the Michigan Community Theatre Foundation, Inc. and the owners of the building proceeded slowly. Finally, they agreed to sell us the theatre in June of 1979. The Butterfield Company agreed to sell us the fixtures and donated our beloved pipe organ to the Foundation. Our theatre had been preserved intact just as we had hoped.

In August, 1979, the Butterfield Company made preparations to vacate the theatre. Lobby furniture dis-

appeared and cleaning dropped to a minimum. *The Sound of Music* was booked for the last week, and manager Barry Miller requested that the organ be used during every intermission of the film. A last intermission schedule was published, and our organists went "full-time" for those last days, sensing correctly that this was the end of an era.

Final intermission honors fell to Newton Bates who brought the organ up for the last time on the evening of August 4, 1979. *The Sound of Music* had been replaced for the last day by *Days of Heaven*, and to the strains of "Goodnight, Sweetheart," the Michigan Theatre closed forever as a first run motion picture house.

The theatre remained dark for only three weeks. The Foundation reopened the building in September and the first event was an organ concert by Lansing's Scott Smith. The next week Dennis James performed the original accompaniment for a showing of D.W. Griffith's silent classic *The Birth of A Nation* to an audience of University of Michigan students. At the end of the three-hour film, the audience (most of whom had never heard a theatre organ) gave the perspiration-soaked Dennis James a standing ovation.

During the next few months, bookings for concerts, lectures, and films began to come in. For the films, the organ was featured for a thirty-minute overture and a short intermission. The regular organ staff of Bates, Otto and the writer were soon back in business.

One year after the end of our long "intermission" era, the Michigan Theatre and its pipe organ are busier than ever. The theatre has a professional manager, Mr. Ray Mesler from the Embassy Theatre in Fort Wayne, Indiana; some restoration has taken place, and rental contracts have been signed for the 1980-81 season. Thanks to one inconspicuous pipe organ and the enthusiasm of those who loved it, a theatre has been saved. For many years to come, the Barton pipe organ will be on hand to give Michigan Theatre audiences a very special musical treat.

Henry B. Aldridge is an Associate Professor of Telecommunications and Film at Eastern Michigan University. He has been associated with the Michigan Theatre for ten years.

□

The 3/13 Barton is on a four-poster lift at the left corner of the orchestra pit. The organ speaks through the grilles on either side of the auditorium.

