

# Red River's No-Nonsense Preparation

by Lance E. Johnson

We have heard much discussion in the past year concerning the fact that organ concert artists have been forced to play instruments which are in poor condition because of improper maintenance. Those who attend the national conventions can recite horror stories of the extreme embarrassment brought to ATOS chapters and organists when organs act up during concerts. Some concert artists have almost refused to consider playing organs with which they are not already familiar, because artists fear what they will find waiting for them after they sign their contracts. In many cases their fears are well-founded.

I would like to share with our readers the procedures for preparing the Wurlitzer organ in the Fargo Theatre, located in Fargo, North Dakota, which is under the artistic control of the Red River Chapter ATOS.

The condition of the organ prior to bringing in an artist is regarded with utmost concern. Every facet of the organ's mechanical and tonal aspects is thoroughly scrutinized at least three weeks before the concert. Maintenance sessions occur every Saturday morning from 8 to 12 o'clock, from October through April, with a no-nonsense attitude. In the basement dressing room complex is a blackboard listing jobs for the various members; many of the tasks apply directly to the maintenance of the organ. Recently, a shop was established with a work bench, vise, tool rack, and paint cabinet, so that now it is possible to do just about any operation on the organ without leaving the theatre.

Beginning the third week before the concert, the following takes place: A written list of all dead notes

is made, as well as a list of any malfunctions, such as banging shades, air leaks, dead stops, etc. Then each reed stop is gone over to check for poor regulation, that is, notes that are too loud or too soft within the rank. This is important to identify for the tuning process, so that these uneven notes can be brought back to proper regulation. The remaining sessions before the concert will then be devoted entirely to eliminating those problems. During these sessions, chamber temperatures will be checked to make sure the electric heaters are functioning, so that each chamber is always at exactly the same temperature. If a problem occurs with heat, there is still time to correct it. When the day of the concert arrives, the only thing left to do is the tuning.

The artist usually arrives one to two days before the concert. Scheduling the organ tuning for early in the day usually works out best with the artist, as that person probably practiced late into the previous night and would welcome some extra sleep just before the concert.

At 7:30 a.m. on the day of the concert, the blower is turned on and allowed to run for a full half-hour before tuning to allow the wind lines to warm up. This will always raise the temperature one or two degrees within the chambers.

All other maintenance crews are asked to stay away from the theatre until the tuning is complete, so there will be no interference which could delay the tuning.

At 8 a.m., the temperament is reset on the tuning stop (we use the octave 4') and the tuning commences. At intervals of about one-half hour, the chamber temperature is checked for increases. Usually we find that

excessive heat can be evacuated by keeping the chamber doors open to keep the temperature the same for the duration of the tuning session. If the temperature still creeps up, tuning is stopped until the situation can be corrected.

In order to tune across, an intercom is used for the tuning stop to be heard in the other chamber(s). After the tuning is complete, the uneven reed pipes are regulated by the key holder, who will then have the intercom at the console.

The remainder of the day is assigned to other crews to complete their work.

At 6 p.m., the reeds are again checked for any notes that might have slipped out of tune (there are always a few) and chamber temperatures are checked again. This follow-up work is always coordinated with the artist, in case he or she has asked to have an extra practice session just before the concert. A note pad is left for the artist to jot down any tuning problems or malfunctions which might have occurred after the tuning. If combinations were not set the night before, this can now be done with plenty of time to spare.

At this point, the countdown begins with a *written check list*, starting with the temperature used during tuning. There are eighteen check points, so there is little possibility of Murphy's Law taking over at a concert.

The final countdown is from 7 until 8 p.m. (concert time) and consists of the following items: Temperature checks at 7 p.m. and 7:50 p.m., blower greased, stand-by DC power checked and voltage noted, piano blower checked, console indicator lights and music lights checked, switch stack checked for leaking magnets telling of a dead or ciphering stop, lift power pack checked along with its reserve power, pipe puller assigned, cipher signal button at console checked (this rings a bell in the dressing room complex), and, finally, the organist is told at 7:55 p.m. that the blower is on and everything is "all systems go."

Now, why go to all this fuss? I think the reason is fairly obvious. We all want peace of mind. Most of all, we want the artist to have pleasant memories after playing our chapter organ, and want to come again for a future concert. □