

Ashley Miller Unveils Kimball

CANADA'S LARGEST THEATRE ORGAN

by Frank W. Pratt

Five years' hard labor in pursuit of an elusive dream, with the encouragement and active participation of some of the top names in the North American theatre organ world, were climaxed on September 17 by the concert debut of Canada's largest theatre organ in Kingston, Ontario. This magnificent instrument is unusual in several respects: It's not a Wurlitzer, but a beautiful Kimball; it's not in a theatre or even a pizza parlor, but in a church; it's not in a big city but in an old university town at the eastern end of Lake Ontario, and it was successfully kept under wraps until nearly completed.

The Kingston Theatre Organ Society's nucleus of a dozen dedicated souls were two years into the project before the first faltering notes could be played from the console, but their biggest thrill came when the lights dimmed over a hushed sellout crowd on opening night. Then an amber spotlight picked out none other than the renowned Ashley Miller at the gleaming white console. His rousing opener, appropriately enough "On A Wonderful Day Like Today," surpassed all expectations with glorious sounds filling every corner of the vibrant auditorium. When the spotlight changed to blue for a very

sophisticated "Blue Moon" only the very young could fail to be transported to, say, the Chicago Theatre in another era. Ashley was quick to point out, however, that the theatre organ is not just a nostalgic relic but very much an ongoing instrument for the music of today.

Obviously buoyed up by the boisterous response of the first-nighters, Ashley plunged into one of his most outstanding concerts. He remarked

later that he was so thrilled by the responsive instrument and audience that he just didn't want to stop. Indeed, it was eleven p.m. when the last echoes of his encore "Stardust" died away among the rafters. The former star of Radio City Music Hall repeated the performance to a second capacity crowd the following night, and on Friday afternoon an unsuspected side of Ashley Miller came out in a wild and woolly matinee for

The Anglican (Episcopal) Church of the Redeemer in Kingston, Ontario, houses Canada's largest Theatre Organ, a 3/21 Kimball. *(Bill Baird Photo)*





Ashley Miller after his triumphant opening concert at the Kingston Kimball.

(Frank Pratt Photo)

a horde of children brought in by bus from city schools. There is, evidently, nothing like a theatre pipe organ in the hands of a magician to soothe savage breasts.

An Elusive Dream For Canadians

Canada never did have many theatre organs (there were more Wurlitzers in the border city of Buffalo, New York, than in this whole country) and many of them were home-grown Warrens. Thus the dream of the original three Kingston ATOSers (teacher-organist John Robson,

radio executive John Carey and engineer-organist Frank Pratt) seemed remote in 1975. Despite customs duties, foreign exchange and vast distances, finding an available organ in the U.S. — big enough to be impressive, yet affordable — was the only way to go. An indefatigable telephoner, John Robson eventually pinned down the 3/12 Kimball from the State Theatre in Youngstown, Ohio. Long in storage, every crack permeated with steeltown coal dust, the scattered parts of this venerable instrument were trucked three hun-

dred miles across the border into Canada by four tired volunteers. The customs obstacle was neatly bypassed by Flora MacDonald, our co-operative Member of Parliament, who very kindly nudged through a bill exempting all fifty-year-old antiques from duty!

Locating a suitably large auditorium proved, to say the least, difficult. The city's performing arts centre, a former movie house, shuddered at "that big console in our orchestra pit," and the prospect of organ pipes in the dressing rooms ruled out a beautiful high school auditorium despite elaborately-illustrated presentations to the Board of Education.

A quite opposite, but typical as it turned out, reaction came from Rev. Jim Jackson of the Church of the Redeemer where ATOS member Frank Pratt was organist: "Why not?" In short order the Vestry Council waxed enthusiastic about the idea, with the inevitable result that the good folk of the church suffered the indignities of the damned for four years with dirty organ parts in every pew, followed by clean organ parts in every pew and, eventually, assembled organ parts behind the altar. There followed a year of uncertain organ music on Sundays from a half-assembled organ (every few weeks a new stop would contribute to the hymns) until today the last verse of every hymn bursts forth like a triumphant cathedral organ. The poor old Kimball has turned out to be, in fact, a genuine dual-purpose instrument that is the pride of the church.

Could YOU go to church here? Kingston parishioners did, and their super-patience has paid off with a super pipe organ. (Bill Baird Photo)

A Thoroughly Modern Rebuild

The original twelve ranks have become 21, with other goodies added along the way: A converted player piano, a Robert Morton Marimba-Harp, a Wurlitzer Chrysoglott (completely rebuilt by the rector of the church who had never heard of a Chrysoglott until it arrived, but he is nothing if not resourceful!) along with extra toys and every kind of cymbal known to man. It's all controlled from an elegant white-and-gold console (the church pillars were painted to match) with 256 stop tabs, 66 combination pistons and decidedly innovative solid-state circuitry.

The electronic marvels which liberate artists from the technological limitations of the past include



every useful unification extension possible, a channel-selector whereby up to eight organists can dial their own 66 combinations, a cassette interface for storing any number of additional combination settings, plus programmable crescendo pedal, crash toe-lever and pedal trap selector. One of two sets of shutters on each of the two chambers can be deactivated to soften the impact when desired.

The Ultimate Console

The console is an organist's delight, from the two 32' resultants and no less than seven 16' pedal stops, to the pizzicato touch and nine tremulants (a tenth, on the Vox Humana, comes on automatically when the stop is turned on, to save tab space on the backboard). Each of the 2½ rows of stop tabs is individually lighted, as is the backboard, and individual LEDs warn if any of the reversible controls is active. The Kimball-style sound-effect pistons across the top of the solo manual were increased to 20 and provide a handy way to insert a triangle plink, wood block — or siren, for that matter. Fifteen of the combination pistons are generals and there is even a switching device coupling the divisional pistons of any manual or pedal to any other, providing, in effect, a total of 60 general pistons! Except for the keyboards and pedalboard, most of the console hardware is new. The expanded stop-rails were built over one winter in Frank Pratt's basement.

Cooperative Installation Effort

The installation, which was assisted financially by the cultural affairs branch of the Ontario government and private sources, was carried out with the active participation of the rector and parishioners of the Church of the Redeemer. The pipework is on three levels in each chamber, across the front of the church and behind a new wall built and finished personally by Rev. Jim Jackson, whose capacity knows no bounds. Vast drapes conceal the swell shutters, but their open weave poses no hindrance to the sound (although sometimes they billow out under 15 inches of wind). Typical of the problems painfully surmounted was the blower. The original blower arduously coaxed from Youngstown to Kingston was completely refurb-



Kingston school children hear all about the theatre organ from Ashley Miller. For Sunday services, the console is moved twenty feet to the right. (Frank Pratt Photo)

ished and its motor rewound to 550 volts, but when installed proved too weak to reach the top level to properly wind the hungry Tibia pipes! A telephone search all over North America for a 15 hp replacement drew a blank, so a new one was built to order by Spencer Turbine and, fortunately, fills the bill beautifully if expensively.

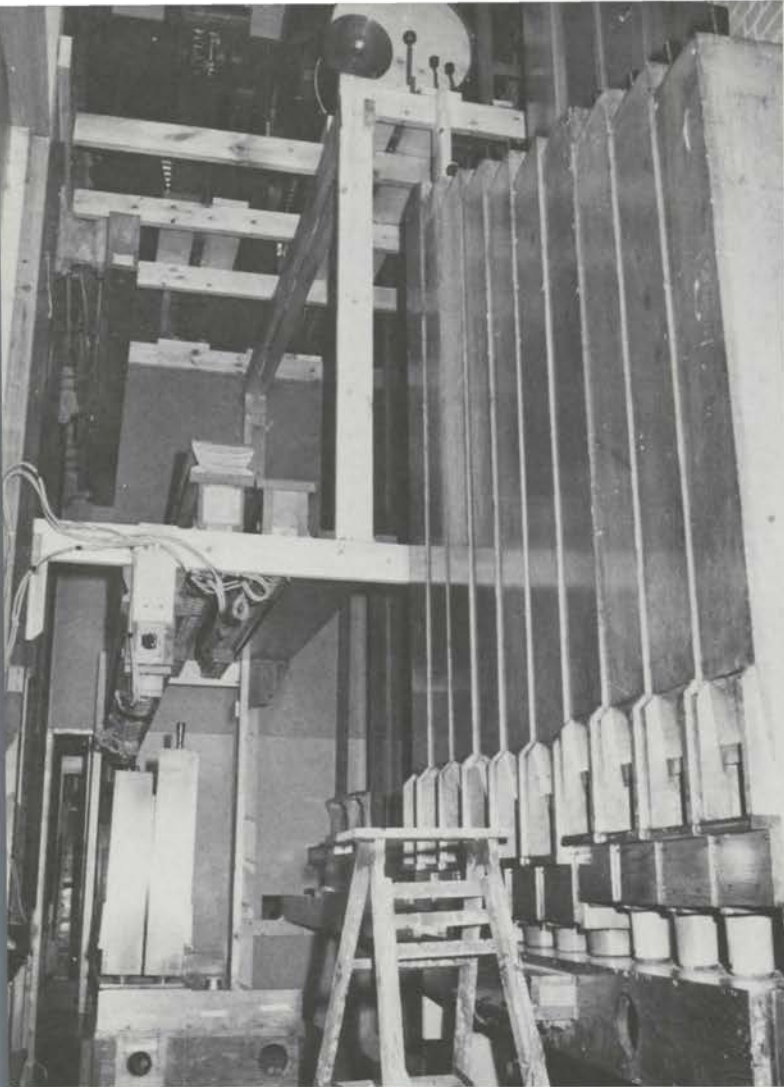
To ensure a finished redesign satisfactory to performing artists, detailed advice was obtained from Ashley Miller and Dennis James, who paid several visits, and from Ron Rhode and various other renowned

artists. The physical redesign was engineered in situ by the widely-respected consultant Allen Miller of Connecticut, and the bulk of the in-chamber installation was done by the Keates Organ Company of Acton, Ontario, whose Dave Granger, already a theatre organ buff, has taken a great personal interest. The console electronics were produced by the Classic Organ Company of Toronto, which enjoys a high reputation in this field. Allen Miller came back to spend the month of July 1981 on tonal finishing and Ashley Miller worked with him latterly to help with

Openings for original Kimball shutters below, and smaller Wurlitzer shutters above for Sunday use.

(Bill Baird Photo)





Installation in progress inside the solo chamber: chests and some pipework in place but plumbing yet to come. (Bill Baird Photo)

the final achievement of a most impressive tonal result.
Opening Well Supported Locally

The opening concerts were well supported in the local press with a full-page advance story, no less, and a favourably-written review afterward. The concert itself was staged in a professional manner with radio personality Keith Woodend as MC and society members dividing the usual thankless chores. Ladies of the church pitched in with refreshments on both nights and the church is hoping for a possible fringe benefit in Sunday attendance.

Several visiting theatre organ luminaries turned up for the opening, including charter ATOS member Cleanan Blakely, Geoffrey Paterson and Ted Gill from Toronto, and Champ Champagne from *Keyboard World* magazine. A four-a-year concert series has been organized, with Dennis James booked to perform on November 26-27, followed by Walter Strony, Kay McAbee and hopefully Tom Gnaster. □

ATTENTION: RECORDING ARTISTS

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