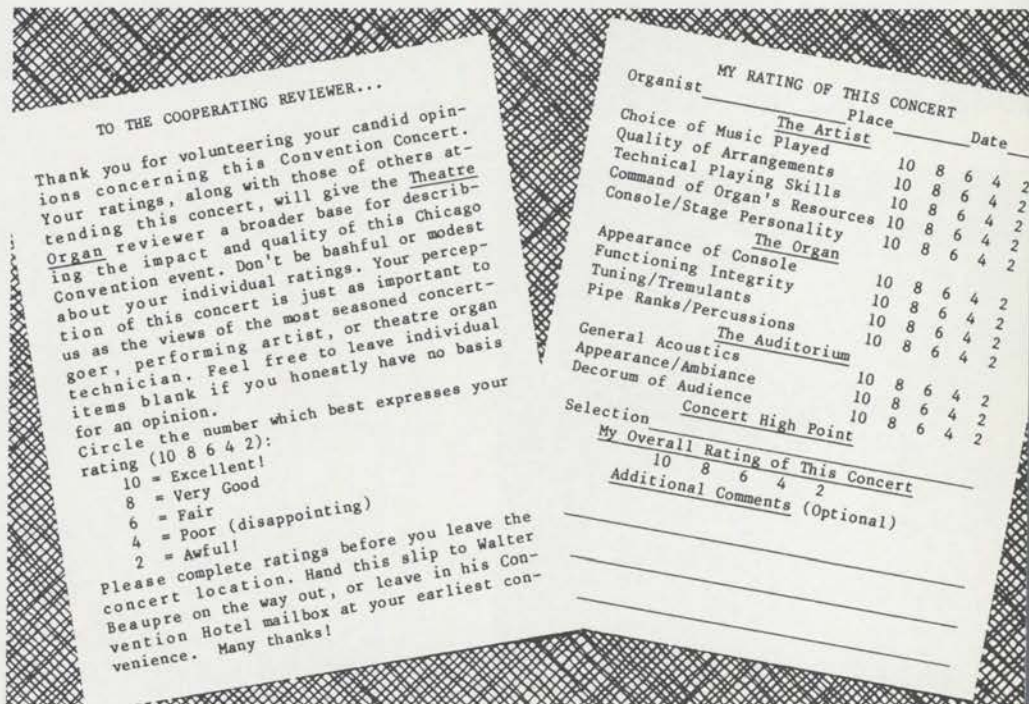


Convention Concerts in Review

by Walter J. Beaupre

Pipes Alive In '85 was a Chicago-style 18-course musical feast with a la carte Afterglow and other related events for those stalwarts who can't get enough of a good thing. If that suggests an orgy, be assured no one came away from the banquet with hunger pangs.

To review all the scheduled concerts and stay within the constraints of journal space, your reporter chose in advance to prepare rating forms for each event which were subsequently handed out to 360 Convention goers at random. Of these mini-reviews, 217 (60%) were completed and returned for processing. These ratings provided a data base of over 3000 responses, plus written observations. Let it be said at the outset that there were isolated instances where this reporter questioned the accuracy of his own sampling procedures. More about that later. Right now it's lay-it-on-the-line time. From top to bottom this is how individual events (not just the organists) were rated by you. The number in parentheses (___) indicates the average of all ratings for the event.



RANK ORDER OF RATINGS BY 217 COOPERATING REVIEWERS IN THREE CATEGORIES

By Artist	By Organ Played	By Auditorium
Tom Hazleton* 10+	Wurlitzer-Gottfried 4/24 10.00	Civic Opera House 10.00
Hector Olivera 9.92	(St. Mary's Seminary)	Coronado Theatre 9.87
Lew Williams 9.92	Wurlitzer 2065 10.00	Rialto Square Theatre 9.77
Rob Calcaterra 9.84	(Temple Sholom)	Temple Sholom 9.52
Jim Riggs 9.82	Barton 4/17 (Coronado) 9.90	Hinsdale Theatre 9.26
Devon Hollingsworth 9.70	Skinner 4/50 (Civic) 9.90	Maine North 9.26
Tom Gnaster 9.16	Wurlitzer (Elm Skating) 9.75	St. Mary's Seminary 9.06
Bill Kuczek 8.77	Owl Cinema (Hinsdale) 9.70	Music Box Theatre 8.93
Faust/Hazleton 8.77	Barton 4/21 (Rialto) 9.36	Downers Grove H.S. 8.53
Tom Wibbels 8.69	Barton 6/62 (Chicago Stadium) ... 8.73	Pickwick Theatre 8.36
Rosemary Bailey 8.34	Wurlitzer 3/10 (Downers Grove) ... 8.61	Elm Skating Rink 8.16
Dwight Beacham 8.24	Wurlitzer 3/11 (Pickwick) 8.27	Chicago Stadium 7.77
Barbara Sellers 8.20	Barton 3/10 (Genesee) 8.25	Patio Theatre 7.33
Rex Koury 7.84	Wurlitzer 3/10 (Maine North) 8.22	Genesee Theatre 7.33
Jack Olander 7.43	Wurlitzer 3/10 (WGN) 7.87	WGN Studio 7.22
Leon Berry 6.46	Wurlitzer 3/10 (Aragon) 7.23	Chicago Theatre 7.20
Daley & Wolkowicz 5.52	Barton 3/17 (Patio) 6.76	Gateway Theatre 7.20
Jeff Weiler 4.60	Wurlitzer 4/29 (Chicago) 6.70	Aragon Ballroom 6.96
Hal Pearl 3.33	Wurlitzer-Kimball (Gateway) 5.78	

* Hazleton rating by reviewers who specifically indicated that they were rating only Tom.



Hector Olivera

(Bill Lamb photo)



Rob Calcaterra was the artist at the Coronado Theatre in Rockford.

(Claude Neuffer photo)

Jim Riggs, who played at the Hinsdale Theatre.

(Claude Neuffer photo)



Hector Olivera on the E.M. Skinner in the Civic Opera House (9.95)

If standards of theatre organ playing have risen "since Hector was a pup," then considerable credit goes to the impact of Mrs. Olivera's full-grown son. Cooperating reviewers singled out "Over the Rainbow" in the style of French organist Vierne and Hector's rhapsodic treatment of another J.G. hit "The Trolley Song" as show stoppers. The console shape and draw-knobs (he managed to pop one off!) didn't keep anyone from appreciating the great sounds of the 4/50 Skinner, and the magnificent Opera House with a dramatic stage setting added to the total impact. Reviewers wrote: "How can you top Hector?" "One of Hector's greatest concerts!" "A perfect ten!" "Charming, witty and very talented!" Among his many awesome skills Hector Olivera uses one which should be in the armamentarium of every organist who communicates *between* selections: "Always try to focus the attention of your audience upon what you are about to play — never upon yourself." Those artists who can't resist sharing news about their nervous stomachs, hangovers, and over-abundant sweat glands may gain our sympathy, but only at a price no artist can afford (i.e., sabotaged interest in their playing). If one can be amusing (as Hector is) while luring us to listen — so much the better.

Rob Calcaterra on the Barton 4/7 in the Coronado Theatre (9.87)

Raves for the 2500-seat atmospheric theatre in Rockford, a beautifully maintained *Grande Barton*, and Rob's "original and imaginative repertoire" contributed to high ratings. Reviewers liked "Stars and Stripes Forever," Lemmen's "Fanfare," and "La Vie En Rose." The writer also chose "Birth of the Blues," but noted a superabundance of "cute" novelty numbers. A slide sing-along and film were added for good measure. Comments ranged from "A real winner!" to "My kind of theatre organist."

Jim Riggs at the 3/24 in the Hinsdale Theatre (9.64)

All it took was a superb organ and sheer talent to catapult Jim Riggs into the top five at the Convention. Reviewers wrote: "Want to hear more," "Marvelous change of pace . . . unique, imaginative," "Nice personality!" "Jim's future has to be fabulous!" Favorite selections were "South of the Border," "Nobles of the Mystic Shrine," "Oriental Hoochy-Koochy," and "Honeysuckle Rose." This fan flipped over "Girl Friend of the Whirling Dervish." One cooperating reviewer noted that the piano was ever-present in the accompaniment. Could be. We saw a *five*-manual console up front. What's happening?



Devon Hollingsworth played the Wurlitzer in Temple Sholom.

(Claude Neuffer photo)

Devon Hollingsworth at the Wurlitzer 4/32 in Temple Sholom (9.74)

An Art Deco sanctuary with a console once blessed by Reginald Foort helped to keep Mr. Hollingsworth very much in the winner's circle. Reviewers often gave him less than top scores for his choice of selections but none faulted him for his technical playing skills. Anyone who can get raves for "Pomp and Circumstance" *has* to be good. Other favorites were the Hebrew "Prayer," "Pilgrims' Chorus," and (gulp!) "William Tell Overture." This reporter particularly enjoyed "Our Father, Our King" and suggests that anyone going to Chicago should wrangle an invitation to hear the incredibly lovely *Tibia Plena 8'* in this installation.

Lew Williams at the Wurlitzer-Gottfried in St. Mary of the Lake Seminary (9.73)

In temperatures the nether side of limbo the CATOE young organist winner Reid Spears stoked the fires further with a short and sweet cameo performance. Then came Lew. Reviewers praised his (and the Miller orchestra's) "St. Louis Blues March," "Ride of the Valkyries," and the "Toccatina" from Widor's *Symphony No. 2*. Introduced by Williams as "Swamp Music" ("Chloe" with George Wright inspired livestock), this hilarious send-up was also roundly applauded. Critics gave Cardinal Mundelein's hybrid 4/24 a perfect "10." The seminary theatre fared less well. One reviewer "found Lew Williams 99 9/10% better than 90% of the other artists at *this* convention!" Our data says not quite — not at this convention — but almost.

Reid Spears, cameo artist, and Lew Williams at Mundelein.

(Bill Lamb photo)





Dwight Beacham played at the Music Box Theatre in a concert sponsored by the Allen Organ Company. (Claude Neuffer photo)



Tom Wibbels, artist at the Pickwick Theatre. (Claude Neuffer photo)



Rosemary Bailey at the Coronado. (Bill Lamb photo)

Rosemary Bailey Swings the Barton at Rialto Square (9.03)

If Jim Riggs was the exciting "new boy in town," Rosemary Bailey was the most controversial artist of any gender. Nobody sat on the fence, and our reviewers were either ecstatic in their praise or vitriolic in their condemnation. The written comments tell it all: "Great jazz organist!" "Jazz on the theatre organ not real enjoyable," "innovative and imaginative, the Stan Keaton of the organ — and, OH, those FINGERS!" "Pumped the expression shades . . . probably excellent on electronics but poor pipe organ style." Do you get the picture? Then let's list the high points: "Tango in D," "Mame," Gershwin "Medley" [anybody who announces a "Gershwin Medley" and begins with a Cole Porter tune can't be all bad!], "Body and Soul," and ". . . the console descending." This listener coveted her jazz arrangement of "Don't Get Around Much Anymore."

With your permission the reporter will abandon objectivity for the moment and join the battle. As one who likes modern jazz (we're really talking about early '50s jazz — not contemporary jazz) as well as mainstream theatre organ, I found Rosemary to be a welcome blast of fresh air. Yes, I agree that she pushed the Barton beyond its mechanical capabilities, but we'll just have to build better Bartons! ATOS has shown at this Convention that it welcomes young talent. Now we must take the next step and show young talent that we also entertain young ideas. Come on, fellas! This gal plays the shoes, socks, and Dr. Scholl's corn pads off most of us!

There was no difference of opinion whatsoever about the Rialto Square atmospheric theatre in Joliet: absolutely gorgeous.

Bill Kuczek at the Elm Skating Rink on the Geneva Console 4/27 (8.96)

In a highly reverberant barn with the organ's innards scattered all over the ceiling the resulting sound was a stunning surprise. The only factor which kept reviewers from giving the hybrid instrument a perfect "10" was the appearance of the console. High points in Bill's concert were "Hard Hearted Hannah" and "Stairway to the Stars" (really lovely). This reporter also gave honorable mention to "Granada" for outstanding use of solo ranks and "American Bolero." Bill Kuczek as a musician is light years beyond the usual rink player. His medley of tunes in skating style made us itch to rent some wheels! One of our videotaping conventioners replayed a few minutes of Bill's concert back at the Palmer House. Although the colors were a bit thin due to low lighting conditions, the Dolby stereo sound track was unbelievably fine.



Bill Kuczek at the Elm Rink console. (Bill Lamb photo)

Dwight Beacham at the Music Box on a Custom Allen (8.50)

Cooperating reviewers were instructed not to consider the electronic in their ratings of Beacham and the theatre. They did reflect the general audience appreciation of the terrific restoration job Chris Carlo and Bob Chaney have done on this modest atmospheric neighborhood house. But the big winners at this event were Stan and Ollie in *Two Tars*. Reviewers mentioned Dwight's silent movie score as the high point, and one commented, "Best silent movie accompanist I've ever heard." Another was intrigued with Dwight's demonstration of the organ's voices (which only goes to show that even away from TV, commercials can be the highlight of a program).

Tom Wibbels at the Wurlitzer 3/11 in the Pickwick Theatre (8.47)

A Red Buttons look-alike, Tom Wibbels was praised most often for his arrangements of "Elephant Boy," "Cherokee," and the theme from *Exodus*. He was taken to task for practicing aerobics while playing. One reviewer said it best: "He looks like a chicken trying to take off." Tom could make his engaging personality and sense of humor work for him at the console if he would edit out the self-indulgent remarks.

The Art Deco theatre was greatly admired by some, less impressive to others. Tastes do vary. For those who had been to the Pickwick on earlier occasions, both the theatre and organ were greatly improved. General comments prior to the concert led this reporter to suspect that among Wibbels' considerable assets is his press agent.



Tom Gnaster at the Downers Grove console.
(Chuck Włodarczyk photo)



Phil Silberhorn, cameo artist at Downers Grove.
(Bill Lamb photo)

Tom Hazleton, featured artist at the Chicago Stadium Barton.
(Chuck Włodarczyk photo)



Tom Gnaster at Downers Grove High School on the Wurlitzer 3/10 (8.36)

Opinions of the auditorium, the organ, and Tom Gnaster's artistry were not consistent in any direction. It figures. This observer found Tom poorly disciplined and playing badly in his opening stint and very much in command during his closing set. "Dance Macabre" and "Kiss in the Dark" were both second-half high points. One reviewer singled out "Nola" in the first half, which this listener found embarrassingly awful: proof positive that differences of opinion are what keep ball games interesting.

Billed in the Convention program as a cameo artist, Phil Silberhorn's eight long selections gave a new meaning to the word "cameo." But the audience liked him.

Mostly Tom Hazleton at the Chicago Stadium vs. the Barton 6/62 (8.32)

It was at this event that the rating system broke down. Review slips reflected the Convention program information that Nancy Faust was to be the featured artist with a cameo by Don Springer. Nancy, the resident organist at Comisky Park, did in fact open the concert with one medley, a pleasant "Hooked on Classics" concoction which included everything from "The Bee" to the "Hallelujah Chorus" — all in the same tempo and with little change in registrations. Don Springer followed with a trio of tunes which were, again, pleasant but routine. Then from out of nowhere Tom Hazleton was beamed up to the console where he instantly transformed the Barton from a pumpkin into a gold coach with 62 magnificent Clydesdales, and whisked us off to that magic land where the biggest goosebumps grow. Those who altered their rating slips gave Hazleton a 10+ on all counts. Others conscientiously tried to rate Nancy (as directed!) or lumped the three artists together. It's probably safe to say that had Tom Hazleton been featured as the Barton artist from the outset, this event might have surpassed all others at the Convention. Reviewers mentioned "Jalousie" and "Lost Chord" as favorites. Mrs. Dan Barton, wife of the organ builder, was saluted by Tom and the ATOS audience with a stirring ovation. Sans PA system Tom also acknowledged his two cohorts who helped change registrations as "the most expensive combination action in the world."

Jack Olander plays the Wurlitzer 3/10 at Maine North High School (8.22)

Are theatre pipe organs safe anywhere these days? The Maine North High experience (school now closed and "For Sale") tells us that a thing of beauty is not necessarily a joy forever. Jack Olander did his best to counteract the gloomy news. The Wurlitzer as installed had a bright studio quality (too bright for some reviewers). Jack's opener was a dramatic departure



Don Springer, cameo artist at the Chicago Stadium.
(Chuck Włodarczyk photo)

from the usual "No Biz Like Coming Up Roses That's Entertainment Get Happy" tune. It was a very quiet, serene "Ice Castles" with subtle screen projections of clouds on deep blue. Too effective! Reviewers liked "Here's That Rainy Day," "Vilia," and "Brazilian Sleighbells." Jack rated highest for his choice of selections and lowest for quality of arrangements.

Barbara Sellers at WGN on the Wurlitzer 3/10 (7.85)

Review of this concert by Grace E. McGinnis

Limited seating at the WGN studio made it possible for only 200 to attend this program, but for those who were there it was a trip into yesterday with a most personable, second generation theatre organist. Barbara Sellers is the daughter of Preston and Edna Sellers who are both well-known in the Chicago area and are both in the ATOS Hall of Fame. The organ is a 3/10 Wurlitzer that has been rebuilt by the Kimball Company. It speaks into a concrete studio, which gives it a unique reverberation, even with the room full of people.

Miss Sellers opened with a light and lively "Flying Down to Rio." She then introduced her mother, who was warmly received by the audience. A trio of Jerome Kern tunes was her next offering, "Ka-lu-a," "Look for the Silver Lining" and "Til the Clouds Roll By." We had just settled nicely into that era when Barbara brought us to 1945 with a gentle rendition of "Laura." "Daddy," played with a Waller-like walking bass, concluded the first portion of the program.

The second half of her presentation consisted of a simulated radio broadcast after the style of her father's famous Hartz shows. Vince Viverito served as the announcer, and Barbara played the role of Preston Sellers. The "sponsor" was American 3-V's bird products "for the feathers you love to ruffle." As soon as the "little feathered friends" were "all set

by their radios," Barbara played a lilting version of Fritz Kreisler's adaptation of the old Viennese melody, "Midnight Bells." Gershwin's "Our Love Is Here to Stay" and Anderson's "Belle of the Ball" completed the 3-V's broadcast, but a nice touch was added at the close when Miss Sellers raised her hand to hold the applause, and we heard a tape of Edna Sellers playing her own fade-out theme from a 1936 broadcast. We loved it.

Barbara's encore was "When I Grow Too Old to Dream," which made us grateful that we are not. Hearing and feeling a small piece of yesterday by a charming artist who is very much of today was a truly excellent beginning for the week ahead.



Barbara Sellers played the convention opener at WGN studio. (Claude Neuffer photo)

Rex Koury on the Chicago Theatre Wurlitzer 4/29 (7.30)

Apollo, god of music, was still driving his chariot across the proscenium arch, but tiny creatures were scurrying under the Chicago seats looking for stray popcorn. Time and wanton vandalism have taken their sorry toll. Only the news that the Chicago and its very special organ are slated for complete restoration could dispell the gloom.

Rex Koury came forth gallantly, like the noble gladiator he is, and was promptly impaled on the cipher to end all ciphers. Rex plodded on, dodging fouled-up light cues, dead notes, and unplayable ranks. Reviewers liked "Swan Lake" and "Saints Go Marching In." Another bright spot was the cameo performance by Martin Ellis, Young Theatre Organist of 1985, who apparently had been working at the Chicago as relief organist in recent months.

Earlier in the day some ATOS members complained that they hadn't heard any soft, pretty, dreamy ballads. Rex obliged during the second half of the wake. This sentimentalist especially liked the gorgeous arrangement of "Beyond the Sea."

Reviewers blasted the condition of the organ and the theatre. Rex got caught in the flack and fared only slightly better. It must be admitted that the Convention did not end on a T. S. Elliot "bang. . ."

Jeff Weiler at the Genesee Theatre Barton 3/10 (6.50)

Unless you always had a burning desire to visit Jack Benny's home town, there wasn't much doing in Waukegan. The theatre was clean and in good repair — but hot! Nadia Brown was a lovely young lady gifted with a glorious soprano voice and a hopelessly inappropriate song. Jeff's animated sing-along quickly became a futile exercise in synchronization. Jeff, the ball, and the audience were all bouncing to different drummers. The Buster Keaton film *Pale Face* was a wonderful movie, and Jeff was obviously playing a Lee Erwin score, only the score seldom fit the action. For

the first time reviewers began listing selections they *didn't* like: the two Robert Elmore pieces. That's a shame because when Elmore played them for this listener years ago they were great.

It was obvious to reviewers that Weiler had decided to "wing it" without preparation and fell on his "Howard seat." Sorry, Jeff, but you'll have to work very hard to live this one down. My calculator just informed me that the average Convention-goer paid about fifty bucks a concert (the price of a ticket to *Cats* on Broadway!) to listen to *each* artist during Pipes Alive in '85. At those prices, sonny, expectations are high!

Leon Berry at the Patio Theatre Barton 3/10 (6.23)

Romanesque urns and small balconies punctuated the roof line of the Patio. There were wall medallions with lights on pedestals. The very dim light prompted the ever-optimistic reporter to turn on his flashlight and have a better look. That was a mistake. Well, at least the wide screen installation hadn't destroyed the lines of the proscenium arch.

As for the great Leon Berry whose recordings have reached more people than all other American theatre organists put together, one reviewer summed it up best: "I crave the nostalgia Leon's playing evokes." Unfortunately, six of the eight reviewers weren't buying pure nostalgia and their anguish was very real. Some questioned the wisdom of asking Leon to play for the Convention after a debilitating illness. On the other hand, CATOE may have been thinking of those hundreds of theatre organ fans who wanted to tell their grandchildren, "We once heard the legendary Leon Berry IN PERSON." All of us pray for his full and speedy recovery.

Sally Daley and Dennis Wolkowicz at the Wurlitzer/Kimball Consoles in the Gateway Theatre (6.06)

This concert offered a rare opportunity to hear two artists at two consoles playing mostly together. But except when there are



Jeff Weiler was the artist at the Genesee Theatre in Waukegan. (Claude Neuffer photo)



Leon Berry at the Patio console. (Bill Lamb photo)

Rex Koury in a relaxed mood after his concert at the Chicago Theatre. (Bill Lamb photo)



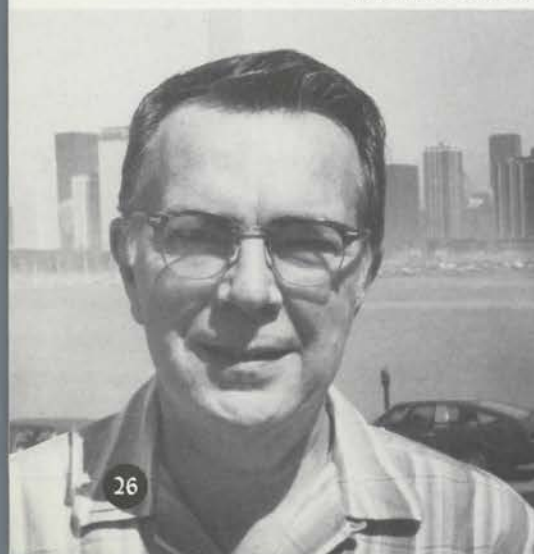


Sally Daley and Dennis Wolkowicz at the Gateway Theatre. (Claude Neuffer photo)



Dancers Xiomara Roldan and Lou Brock at the Aragon Ballroom. (Bill Lamb photo)

The reviewer . . . Dr. Walter J. Beaupre. (Claude Neuffer photo)



long lines at the powder-room door, two heads are not always better than one. Two reviewers dutifully mentioned "Sound of Muzak" and "It Happened in Monterey" as high points; eight said there weren't any. The general consensus was that the organ just wasn't "ready for prime time" (right wall expression shades weren't working at all!), and neither were the players. Seeing the last remaining Rapp & Rapp atmospheric theatre helped to make the visit worthwhile for theatre history buffs.

Hal Pearl in the Aragon Ballroom at the Wurlitzer 3/10 (5.37)

There must be something irresistible about freshly spilled warm blood. Any number of conventioners approached the writer with the comment, "I can't wait to read your review of this one!" It happened so often that yours truly began to get the feeling that we have let ourselves become the American Theatre *Organists* Society. And when I examined the mini-reviews I found that the overall ratings of events generally reflected scores for the *organist* and ignored their ratings of the organ and auditorium. Consequently, for this *event* the data is both accurate and grossly misleading.

Some of the more constructive comments concerning Mr. Pearl's playing were as follows: "should have practiced," "poorly prepared program," "too much chimes," "should have been asked to play a short cameo on a courtesy basis." Less constructive were such comments as these: "Was he good once?" "Set back the movement 30 years!" "National attendees should not be subjected to such brutalizing of a theatre organ."

Once again your reporter asks your indulgence concerning his personal biases for a moment. Suppose as a youngster in a small town you heard those wonderful broadcasts from the Aragon Ballroom in Chicago, and 45 years later had a chance to see what it was really like. You walked in the door and discovered that it was more fabulous than your wildest dreams: the polished dance floor, the massive Moorish courtyard, the twinkling stars overhead, and the hypnotic revolving mirrored ball — an exotic Shangri-La frozen in time. And then suppose a very astute showman (Hal Pearl) paid tribute to the likes of Wayne King, Eddy Howard, Dick Jurgens, Kay Kyser and a host of other favorites long gone. He also provided two superb dancers, Xiomara Roldan and Lou Brock, who floated in the spotlight, reminding you of how you figured you must have looked out there (45 years ago) with the prom date of your dreams. Get the scene?

Frankly, Mr. Pearl, you were the only artist during the entire Convention who made me blink back the tears. Just about every fine virtuoso at Pipes Alive could



Hal Pearl at the Aragon Ballroom console. (Bill Lamb photo)

benefit from Hal Pearl lessons — not in playing the organ — but in playing the human heart! Nostalgia has very little to do with technical perfection. If it did, there might not even be an ATOS.

Yes, there were other memorable moments during Pipes Alive in '85: catching Melissa Ambrose, the Detroit runner-up for Young Theatre Organist of the Year, doing marvelous things with "In the Mood" and "Dueling Banjos" on an electronic; those fatally comfortable seats at the Adler Planetarium during the Afterglow, discovering new uses for cardboard and driveway sealer (it's called "Pizza") during Dave Wickerham's concert (yes, John from Central Ohio, you poured a mean Pepsi!); always getting to theatres so early that we just missed laying the cornerstone; reformed smokers making life miserable for the unwashed; MC's reading fascinating facts about the artists, theatres, and organs to us from the Convention Program . . . enough "zingers" already!

Seriously, CATOE and ATOS have every right to be proud of a Convention which included the best atmospheric theatres left on this planet, a #1 rated concert played on a non-theatre organ (how about *that*, AGO!), great moments in settings from Temples to skating rinks, a farewell concert in the "old" Chicago Theatre, more really good, playable theatre organs than we have a right to expect these days, and that wonderful "toddlin' town" in which 850 grown-ups could take this whole business of theatre pipe organs seriously without feeling just a tad silly about our enthusiasm. The late Mabel Mercer, queen of the sophisticated night club singers and darling of the Jet Set, claimed that the greatest review she ever received was from a little boy who came up to her after a concert and with eyes shining said, "You done good!" Chicago, you done good! □