

# The Theatre Organ . . . Wherein Lies Its Future?

by John Ledwon

The theatre organ movement of today is suffering from, at best, a static interest level and, at worst, a gradual decline of interest. What can be done to increase interest, particularly with the younger segment of our population? I offer the following suggestions, based on my experience in working with persons 16 to 22 years of age in a musical environment for the past ten years, both as a professional musician and as an educator.

We of the theatre organ world need to involve the young in order that the movement stay alive. We must involve large numbers of people with diverse talents and interests if we expect to see large scale growth. ATOS and similar groups must examine their goals closely to see if they are current and if they are on a musical track that appeals to a large portion of the general population. The theatre organ must be made to appeal to a much larger potential audience if it is to survive.

The theatre organ has proved that it can excite and enamor audiences of the '70s and '80s; just look at the crowds and their reactions and enthusiasm at pizza parlors. Unfortunately, this ray of hope is diminishing. Why? Possibly because the pizza parlor organist either couldn't or wouldn't present music from today's current repertoire, or perhaps the theatre organ couldn't perform current pop music credibly. It's okay to delight the six-to 12-year-olds with tinkling bells and snappy drums and help the senior population relive happier moments with music they grew up with, but what about the 16-to 35-year-old group? They are the future audience, and their music has been largely ignored.

Here we have what I consider to be the focus of the problem of generating greater interest in theatre organ — the inability or unwillingness of the majority of today's theatre organ artists to play current pop music and the fact that the theatre organ, in its current configuration, cannot compete musically with today's "sound" without the assistance of other instruments. Let me address each of these. First, the artist's ability or willingness to play current pop music. Let's look at willingness first. Presently, much emphasis is placed on keeping the senior population happy, mainly because they are the principle sup-

port group providing funds for the artists and related business interests. If audiences demand music from the '20s, '30s or '40s they get it, mainly because if you deprive them of it they will not attend concerts. So here we have a "Catch 22" situation: older audiences pay the bills and demand music from a bygone era; younger audiences stumble onto a theatre organ concert out of curiosity or whatever, are turned off by the music presented and never return. Now, is it only the musical selections presented that turns off this younger audience, or are other factors involved?

Current pop music is quite complicated rhythmically and is largely vocal in nature. Admittedly much current pop music will not transfer credibly. By credibly I mean in a manner which captures the original mood and drive of a selection of music. Music that will not transfer must not be performed, as it will probably turn out stilted and strange, or worse, comedic. And that is a great way to turn off a younger audience. Current pop music that will transfer well will probably require assistance from other musical sources. The addition of a rhythm section (percussion and electric bass) and an accent section (brass or a synthesizer) will do wonders to the overall sound. Many theatre organ purists will fight tooth and nail this practice of adding other instruments to their beloved theatre organ. However, for the theatre organ to survive in the '80s and beyond it must be done. How many solo musical instrumentalists can you name today (other than vocalists)? Not many, I think. Today's successful musical presentations are cooperative efforts; a single solo instrument just won't make it in today's musical world. When I speak of augmenting the theatre organ with other instruments I don't mean the "Big Band" sound. That era has also passed. I speak of augmentation with electric bass (artists, get off the 16' extensions . . . they're murder in today's modern sound), percussion (not the toy counter but a real live percussionist), brass (not the Post Horn but good brass musicians or a good *professional studio* synthesizer). This "re-creating" the modern sound is why so many good theatre organ artists shy away from current pop music. Most of it cannot be re-created

credibly on a solo theatre organ, and many artists are reluctant to engage other musician's assistance at concerts because of the added expense and cries of outrage from the purists who feel adding anything to the theatre organ is a desecration of the art.

Which brings us to you, the audience. In most cases, the senior audience. What can you do to help the situation? Simply accept change, for without change there can be no future . . . for anything. We live in the '80s; accept that. Sure, things were great in the '20s, '30s and '40s, but would you trade in all the technological advances of today for those of past decades? Probably not. The same goes for today's musical world. Music is an art form in a constant state of flux; stifle this and it dies. The theatre organ movement is static and living in the past; either it moves forward toward the present or it is doomed to gradual extinction. Today's audiences must compromise some of their views and tastes and allow a good portion of a concert to be music of today registered for today. And if that means adding other instruments, so be it. Enjoy the added variety, the new musical experiences. There is a whole new world out there musically, and I'm *not* talking of Acid Rock, Hard Rock, Punk or New Wave, just good contemporary music that sounds great on a theatre organ (with a little assistance from other instruments).

Today's audiences hold the key to the future of the theatre organ. Change your tastes and attitudes and the movement will expand because the artists will introduce new ideas and styles; remain static and you've killed the instrument you profess to love. Expand your musical horizons! Listen to some of the milder contemporary composers. Not everything they write is good, but then, neither were the composers of the past perfect. The milder composers may not be the principle music of the young, but they listen to it and most of them enjoy it. Composers like Andrew Lloyd Webber (who constantly uses nostalgia in his compositions), John Williams, Neil Diamond, Barbra Streisand, Bruce Springsteen and a host of others all have something important to say musically and we need to listen. Also, go see a contemporary motion picture;



examine the tastes of the young. Accept and embrace what you can and try to tolerate the rest. Remember, you were young once and someone most likely had to tolerate your tastes. (I wonder what people born in the 1880s or 1890s had to say about music of the 1920s and '30s.) Go see *Back To The Future*, it's loaded with '50s nostalgia, or see Ron Howard's *Cocoon*. They are both great flicks and if they make you smile and see today's entertainment in a slightly different light they've served their purpose. Also, demand that today's concert artists play music from today. When you find an artist who embraces modern music and styles, don't run away . . .

**SPREAD THE WORD!** Take your grandson or granddaughter to the concert. Expose today's youth to their music performed on a theatre organ. Don't take them to a concert of dated music. I can practically guarantee they won't like it and won't go again. To involve today's young people you must meet them on their terms and give them what they want to hear or they will go elsewhere. There is too much going on musically that appeals to them for them to take the time to understand that which they think they don't like. We must educate them from where they are to where we want them, not the other way around.

One final important point and I'll get off my soapbox. Those of you who are artists or producers of theatre organ concerts must consider yourselves part of the entertainment industry. In order to compete in today's competitive entertainment business, artists and producers must learn to entertain through more than just the auditory portion of the brain. Spectacular lighting, backdrops, staging variety and perhaps positioning the console in such a manner that the artist's back is not always toward the audience (the weakest of all staging positions) must be considered.

How many of you have noticed that I have consistently used the word "artist," rather than "organist"? Why? First, like it or not, the term "organist" or "organ concert" turns off the majority of people today. So, why use it? Find some other way of saying the same thing. Who knows, you might pick up several unsuspecting audience members who might otherwise not have attended the concert. Secondly, for an artist to appeal to the area of potential audience that is going to be needed in order that the theatre organ movement may survive and expand, he or she will need to be more than an organist. Superior musicianship, knowledge of orchestration, versatility in staging techniques and the ability to communicate with the audience in a unique and entertaining style will all have to be shown by the artist if we are to move forward.

Certainly, all of this is going to take time, effort, money and, above all, creativity. But if we don't aim for the top we certainly can't ever come anywhere near it. New blood must be infused into the movement in order for it to survive. Emphasizing contemporary music performed in a contemporary style and staged with contemporary theatrical techniques is a possible solution. The challenge is there; are we capable, both creatively and innovatively, to meet it? To surmount it? □

# PIPES & Personalities

## 15th Annual Mid-Tennessee Organ Bash a Hit

Cumberland Caverns, Tennessee — Roy Davis' Cave Crawl and Organ Bash was again well-attended on November 2. The Chattanooga ATOS Chapter hosted the first stop at the Tivoli Theatre, where manager Clyde Hawkins made the three-manual Wurlitzer available to the tourists. Next stop was the Henry McKinney residence in Chattanooga with its 2/6 Wurlitzer. A new addition to the safari was lunch aboard a moving steam-powered train at the Tennessee Valley Railroad Museum. \$8.75 bought a train ride, a BBQ sandwich, chips and a drink. The annual trek is accomplished by auto and Roy Davis provides a detailed description in his brochure for the benefit of drivers. On to the Allee residence in Manchester, but unfortunately Roy didn't include data on the size of the Allee organ, but describes it as a four-manual Estey. Burt and Ann Allee also have an Ampico grand piano, an orchestrion and jukebox. So the time spent there was lively.

Next, back to McMinnville and the Roy Davis warehouse. For the uninitiated, Roy is a dealer in pipe organs and parts; he maintains a generous supply of goodies to tickle the appetites of collectors. He has three three-manual Wurlitzers set up in the warehouse but doesn't say whether they are in playing condition, although we suspect that at least one is. To quote him, there are "old theatre furnishings, theatre antiques, toys, trivia and junk — enough to confound, confuse and disgust you! Bring your U-Haul trucks!"

At 7:00 p.m. there was the annual banquet in the cave, followed by a tour of the caverns.

There can be little doubt that Roy Davis is upholding the best interests of the theatre organ hobby — even if he is "in the business."

## Calcaterra a Hit With Kids

Nearly 1000 students in Hudson, Wisconsin, were entertained by Rob Calcaterra in several sessions at Phipps Center for the Arts. He played the Wurlitzer formerly installed in the studio of radio station KSTP, St. Paul. In addition to playing popular tunes and silent movie music, he talked about music and his experiences as an organist. Closing the series was a night concert for the public.

In October Rob demonstrated another facet of his musical talent by conducting an or-

chestral concert at Symphony Hall in New York. The program featured two world premieres: a piano concerto by Swiss composer Ruth Schmid-Gagnebin entitled "An American Rhapsody"; and "Spielmusik" by Paul Hindemith. Rob has also been busy composing a variety of musical works.

## Oakland Paramount Installs Sennheiser Hearing-Impaired System

The Paramount Theatre has installed a Sennheiser hearing-impaired system for public use. Listening receivers for hearing-impaired patrons, including those who utilize hearing aids, are available free of charge.

One of the main benefits of the Sennheiser system is that it only picks up sound originating on the stage and not noise around the patron using the system, according to Peter J. Botto, General Manager. Emitters mounted on the walls of the auditorium send infrared light containing an audio signal throughout the theatre.

There are two different receivers which can be used with the Sennheiser system. Lightweight earphones can be worn under the chin, attaching comfortably to the ears much like headphones one uses in an airplane, or a person with a more profound hearing loss who relies on a hearing aid with high amplification may choose the second receiver, which consists of a small induction loop which hooks behind the ear right next to the wearer's regular hearing aid. The audio signal is fed directly to the induction loop; instead of going through earphones. This over-the-ear device also comes with a small, lightweight energy pack which the user can clip to his or her belt,

Rob Calcaterra conducting an orchestral concert in Symphony Hall, New York.

