

RICHMOND IN RETROSPECT

Review of Concerts at the 1986 ATOS Convention

by Rodney Bambrick

This year's convention at Richmond, Virginia, concentrated heavily on the two organs currently playable in the city — at the Byrd Theatre and at the Mosque. Although opinion among conventioners as to which was the better seemed to be fairly evenly divided, both are unquestionably splendid instruments, and I met no one who liked neither! Despite remarkably similar specifications, they produced in their respective auditoriums quite different sounds. Influenced, perhaps, by the fact that one of the first theatre organ records I acquired many years ago was of Dick Leibert playing this very instrument, my own preference was for the more integrated sound at the Byrd Theatre where the organ is situated over the proscenium — though only from a seat in the stalls does one hear it at its best. At the Mosque the chambers are spaced so far apart that even from a seat in the centre of this vast hall the sounds do not always coalesce in a fully satisfying fashion. *Chacun a son gout!*

Walter Strony

The opening recital by Walt Strony at the Byrd Theatre was in some respects a disap-

pointing event. At previous conventions I have heard Mr. Strony play with a panache and a precision which were not always apparent on this occasion. Indeed, I sensed a man not fully at ease and suspect that an instrument not completely operational was largely to blame. That said, it must be admitted that Walt Strony is a performer so far ahead of his contemporaries that even his second best is well worth hearing. His programme ranged widely from snappy rhythmic numbers such as "Root Beer Rag" and "Vanessa" to reflective, lyrical ballads such as "When I Fall in Love" and "Summertime," but was it wise, I wonder, to follow a mainly waltz-time medley from *The Merry Widow* by yet more triple-time tidbits from *Swan Lake*? Full marks, however, for including two off-the-beatentrack items, Bernstein's energetic *Candide* overture and a selection from Sondheim's *Follies*. In my view, Stephen Sondheim is the only contemporary theatre composer — American or British — worthy of comparison with the great Gershwin/Kern/Porter tradition, and his music (not just that ubiquitous number from *A Little Night Music*) deserves to be more widely known.

The recital could have benefited from a greater variety of dynamic level. The quiet moments, as in "All The Things You Are," were all too few and the rather obtrusive, unenclosed marimba was much too pervasive. The short section of "Memory" (is anyone else willing to forget this one?) played with tremulants off made one wish they had been left that way more frequently. Nonetheless, an enjoyable if not quite unflawed performance.

Eddie Weaver

Mr. Weaver is a nice man with an engagingly affable personality which disarms criticism, but I have to say that this was not the most memorable recital in the series. Is there a danger, perhaps, that the longer one plays the less one listens to oneself? Certainly on this occasion Mr. Weaver's approach showed a marked lack of finesse. Of course, for many of the audience this was a trip down memory lane, a *bonne bouche* of nostalgia, and I would wish to deny no one that pleasure.

The recital began with Suppe's "Poet and Peasant," but why, I wonder, was the attrac-

Concert Reviewer Rodney Bambrick

(Ward)

Walt Strony

(Feely)

Eddie Weaver

(Ward)





Lyn Larsen and Dwight Thomas

(Ward)



Ron Rhode

(Ward)

tive opening section of the overture omitted? Elsewhere Mr. Weaver's programming produced some odd bedfellows. I am still puzzled as to why a snatch from the Grieg *Piano Concerto* should have been yoked with "Anitra's Dance," a waltz from *Faust* and a whiff of William Tell! And Eddie's brave attempt to consummate a match between "Secret Love" and "Dancing Tambourine" hardly created connubial bliss for either partner. The pairing of Sondheim's clown song with its more famous predecessor from *Pagliacci* was a happier inspiration.

The brightest spot at this concert was Mr. Weaver's admirable handling of the sing-along in the second half. So many organists on these occasions are inclined to treat the affair as a battle of decibels twixt audience and organ that it was refreshing to listen to a man who has mastered the art of accompanying without dominating, of nudging rather than bulldozing the audience into choral coherence. To do so with a crowd of around 500 in an auditorium as vast as the Mosque was no mean achievement. Nice work — and we got it!

Lyn Larsen/Dwight Thomas

By the time conventioners returned to the Byrd Theatre the organ had been restored to full working order, and Mr. Larsen appeared completely at ease. Not unexpectedly, this was one of the best concerts of the convention. One of Mr. Larsen's enviable talents is his ability to make seemingly endless changes of registration with a minimum of fuss. From start to finish, he was clearly in complete control and produced a dazzling diversity of delectable sounds from this lovely instrument. Particularly effective were his arrangements of two movements from Eric Coates' *London Suite* and his heady race through Leroy Anderson's "Fiddle Fiddle." In the same composer's "Trumpet Lullaby" the soporific effect could have been enhanced, however, by engaging a lower gear. I did also have some reservations about ending with "A Perfect Day." Apart from the fact that I find its sentimentality just a bit fulsome, this was not, I thought, a strong note on which to conclude a concert.

Probably the most promising aspect of the American theatre organ scene at the moment is the emergence of young players who,

despite the fact that they cannot have experienced the theatre organ in its heyday, nonetheless show a real understanding of the instrument's capabilities. One such is certainly Dwight Thomas who presented the mini-recital at the Larsen concert. From a nice bouncy "Taking A Chance on Love" via "Port au Prince" to a deftly executed version of Reginald Forsythe's "Dodging A Divorcee," Dwight revealed much more than promise. He is here to stay.

Jim Roseveare

After this recital one can be in no doubt that Georgia is not the only place from which sentimental gentlemen come. Jim Roseveare's libation at the Mosque was real tear-jerker littered with broken rosaries, late springs and forlorn desires. It was not, I think, a well-designed programme: the mood was too relentlessly tearful, and the poor old tremulants had hardly a second's respite. Ironically, at the one moment when Mr. Roseveare threatened to become airborne (in Cole Porter's Kick song), his efforts were blighted by a cypher — albeit a very obliging one on the dominant!

Despite all this, it was clear that Mr. Roseveare knows how to handle a theatre organ with considerable skill and sensitivity and, although one might have wished for a greater variety of registration, his playing had a pleasantly relaxed feeling about it, with nice touches of counter-melody.

"Journey into Melody" was especially attractive and made me wish more Farnon

Jim Roseveare

(Ward)



fare had been included. His music adapts well to the theatre organ. Another time I should like to hear Mr. Roseveare in a more diverse and more challenging program.

Ron Rhode

My first encounter with Ron Rhode occurred many years ago on my first trip to the American West when I heard him competing with a noisy, pizza-guzzling mob at Mesa, Arizona. Not so at the Byrd Theatre where the audience listened with rapt attention to a programme which was a delight from beginning to end. Although one might, perhaps, have welcomed more moments of repose, the keynote here was variety — variety in mood, style and registration. Mr. Rhode is nothing if not meticulous, and his carefully conceived arrangements made full use of the Byrd Wurlitzer's resources. The music expanded imaginatively from toe-tappers like "Four Leaf Clover" through sentimental ballads such as "Trees" to a stirring finale in an excellent arrangement of the overture to *Die Fledermaus*. Although I would rate this as among the best recitals at the convention, I do have one quibble. Like many of his colleagues, Mr. Rhode is rarely ready to dispense with the tremulants, and this was particularly noticeable in the central section of the Elgar "March" included in his programme. Here the nobilimente character of Elgar's big tune seems to be sadly emasculated by tremulation — especially at its repeat when played on a fairly full registration. In the second half, Ron's brother joined him in three songs. This was a good idea, but the balance between voice and organ was far from ideal, and, in this respect, Mr. Rhode could profitably take a leaf out of Mr. Weaver's book.

Martin Ellis

For a day, it was pleasant to abandon the Byrd/Mosque twins in Richmond and travel up to Washington where the first stop was made at the Bethesda Cinema. This houses a brash, lively nine-rank Wurlitzer which was played by Martin Ellis, the youngest performer at this year's convention though nothing about him suggested immaturity.

This was a splendid demonstration of what can be done with just nine ranks (not all of them well-regulated), two manuals and some imagination. Martin displayed impressive in-



Martin Ellis

(Feely)



Chris Elliott

(Feely)



Lin Lunde

(Feely)

geny in extracting from these resources a much greater variety of tone colour than one might have anticipated, extending them fully by frequent cancellation of the tremulants. After all, treds off on an organ and you have just about doubled the aural spectrum!

He is also to be commended as the only organist at the convention who ventured to include an item from the current pop scene, though I think it is carrying optimism too far to hope that this will woo teenage pop fans into the theatre organ fold.

The only criticism I would make is that his programme was weighted rather heavily on the up-tempo side — a quieter, extended ballad arrangement would have been welcome.

Tom Hazleton

The second stop in Washington was made at the National Cathedral. This is an edifice built to impress, and it does. But how strange, it occurred to me, that a nation which justifiably prides itself on its pioneering spirit should settle for a clever and expensive imitation of an essentially European architectural tradition — and some would say a moribund one at that. I should have preferred to see what the best of American architects could do in a contemporary idiom. Just a thought. Now to matters musical.

The large cathedral organ in its cavernous acoustic is a breed apart and one for which I normally reserve more than a little affection. Alas, I must make an exception for this monster in Washington, D.C. From my seat well back in the nave it sounded all top and

Tom Hazleton

(Ward)

bottom — fiercely aggressive upperwork, booming bass and not a lot in between. Undeniably, the powerful reeds scattered around the building are tremendously exciting, and some of the gentler stops (particularly the Strings) beautifully voiced, but to my ears, the instrument did not produce a satisfying ensemble.

Tom Hazleton's programme was an ambitious one, and I welcomed, especially, the chance to hear no less than four fairly substantial works by American composers, including an intriguing "Fantasia on Nursery Tunes" by Robert Elmore. However, for an audience, most of whose members worship at the shrine of the trembling Tibia, the programme made few concessions. Would it not have been wise, I wonder, to include at least one or two items from the classical repertoire of a more obviously tuneful nature — the Cocker "Tuba Tune" perhaps, or better still, one of the orchestral transcriptions ("Ride of the Valkyries?") now returning to favour.

Chris Elliott

This final recital at the Mosque was pleasant rather than remarkable. Chris Elliott is perhaps too young yet to have developed a style of his own, but his performance was consistently musical — neat, clean playing with few frills and no surprises. In both registration and arrangements, I think that a little more enterprise could have been displayed, and the occasional hesitation suggested that Mr. Elliott was not as familiar with the instrument as he would, no doubt, have wished. Nonetheless, this was a thoroughly enjoyable concert, and I appreciated particularly the inclusion of two items which were probably unfamiliar to most of the audience — Edward MacDowell's noble little piece, "AD MDCXX," and an uncharacteristic morceau by Delius, "Winter Night." At a convention not distinguished for its musical surprises, these were welcome.

Lin Lunde

Playing non-stop for two hours is no mean feat, and this is precisely what Lin Lunde, resident organist at the Byrd Theatre, did when he accompanied the silent film, *Wings*. This was no organistic doodling either: Lin matched the mood of every episode with admirable deftness and maintained the desirable feeling of continuity. Not that the mood

varied all that much; for the most part it vacillated between moments of anguish and scenes of violent aggression, and the only spot where I felt Mr. Lunde missed an opportunity for musical insinuation of the geographic variety was when the scene switched briefly to Paris.

I must confess, however, that I found 120 minutes of unrestrained sentimentality a bit indigestible. My own preference would have been to have a much shorter silent film followed by an opportunity for Mr. Lunde to display his undoubted musical prowess in a less restrictive mould.

Williamsburg

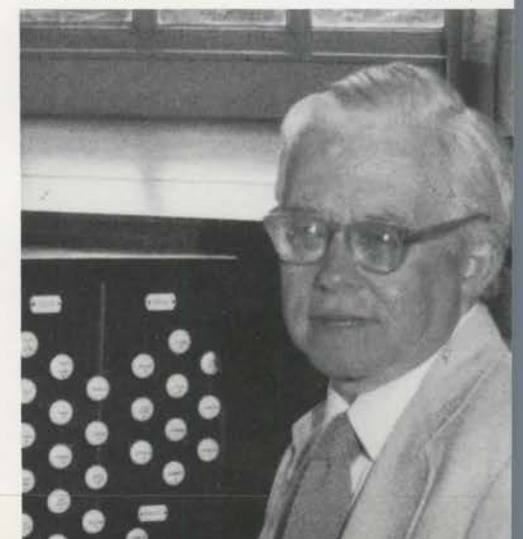
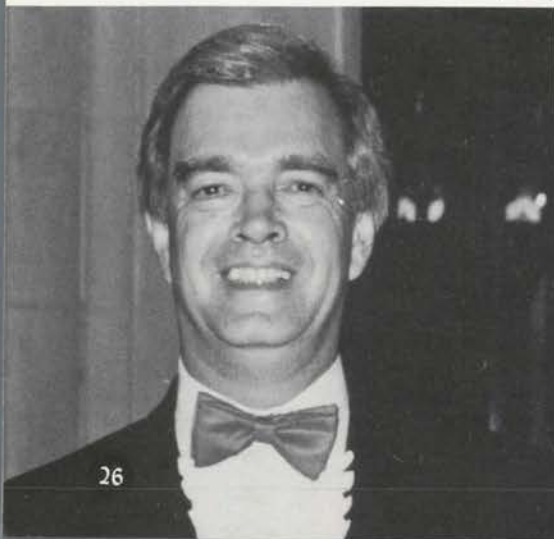
The afterglow trip to Williamsburg included two short organ recitals of a very different kind — one at Bruton Parish Church and the other at the chapel of William and Mary College.

Seldom in the history of organ building can so many pipes have been compressed into so small a space to so little effect as at Bruton Church, nor an instrument designed with such total disregard for its siting. The organ is described as "an eclectic instrument of 93 stops," and for a building with such wretchedly arid acoustics, that's just about 90 stops too many. Very strange in a town which prides itself on authenticity because by no stretch of the imagination could this be described as an eighteenth century organ.

The resident organist, James Darling, presented a well-varied program extending from seventeenth century polyphony (Bux-

James Darling

(Ward)





Thomas Marshall

(Ward)

tehude's "Prelude and Fugue in E minor") to twentieth century Gallic dissonance (Alain's "Litanies") and including some attractive little confections in the Virginia folk idiom. Throughout, his playing reflected the assurance of a man who loves music and who knows his instrument, but I found the totally lifeless ambience an obstacle to full enjoyment.

Much more agreeable to my ears was the recital presented by Thomas Marshall on a small single-manual organ in the Wren Chapel. With only six stops (some divided), this still produced a surprisingly robust body of sound, and its Wood Flute is a delight. Mr. Marshall sensibly restricted himself to music written for an instrument of this kind, and the results were felicitous.

Thoughts General

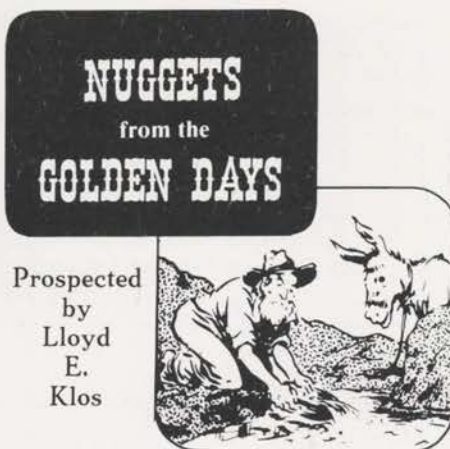
Before closing, there are two general points I should wish to make. First, regarding verbal introductions: where no printed programme is provided, these are obviously desirable, but I do wish performers could be urged to be concise — and audible. All that is needed are brief details of the music to be played: title and composer, perhaps date of publication, and where appropriate, data about the show/film/opera/ballet/suite/overture/cellar from which the music has been taken. Few members of the audience are likely to be interested in knowing that the number about to be rendered was a favourite of the performer's great grandmother, and I always bristle a bit when informed that what I am about to hear is a beautiful melody. That's a verdict I prefer to reach all by myself — after listening to the melody in question!

Second, I think several of the performers to whom I listened could make more effective use of the swell shutters. To watch more than

one of them at work, one could be forgiven for imagining that their early training had been done on one of those ancient domestic contraptions whose wind supply depended entirely on the flapping of pedals — or that they had been instructed to carry out an accelerated-wear-test on the shutter mechanism. Listening to recordings made at the convention confirms my view that this is one aspect of theatre organ playing which needs attention, particularly on an instrument where a very wide range of dynamics can be produced by this means alone. Well gradu-

ated crescendos and diminuendos add immensely to the performance of most music, and on a theatre organ they are not difficult to effect.

In conclusion, may I, as the first non-American to fill the role, say that I felt honoured to be asked to review the concerts at this year's convention. I was instructed to be as candid as I wished, and I have been. I trust the outcome will not be an immediate cancellation of my ATOS membership nor withdrawal of my American Visa, because I do love your conventions. □



This time, we include items about organists from the pages of *Melody Magazine (M)* and *Local Press (LP)*.

February 1921 (M) In a log cabin near Corydon, Iowa, in 1890, was born G. RAY SMITH. He learned to play by ear the old-fashioned melodeon at the age of three and later received instruction from his sister.

When 13, he began piano study and a few years later, was featuring hits and specialties with a medicine show. Mr. Smith has been playing the pictures for the past six years, three years at his present location, the Lyric Theatre in Redfield, South Dakota. Here he employs both organ and piano.

Mr. Smith states: "I consider that my early training in playing by ear is largely responsible for my success at playing the picture, as my ability to improvise stands me in good stead every day. I believe that the most important thing for the interpreter of the photoplay to remember is to fit his music to the action and atmosphere on the screen.

"I spend about two hours preparing my music for each picture. I read all available material and press releases to get a complete understanding of the story, then take the cue sheet (which is a great help but not absolutely reliable in every instance), and arrange my program."

October 1925 (M) Some theatre organists are very modest chaps, and tho our subject has met with enviable success and has built a considerable reputation, he isn't inclined to part with any of the details concerning his achievements. He is TOM TERRY of Loew's State Theatre in St. Louis. From things we've heard about him, we gather that he's one of

the leaders in theatre organ work.

Terry started playing a church organ when he was 14. Since then, he has played on some of the largest theatre organs in the country. He's played vaudeville programs for three years on the Orpheum Circuit, using the theatre organ for this purpose.

Terry did it successfully and proved that his previous experience in orchestral work could be applied to the theatre organ in supplying effects demanded by the vaudeville acts. It has also familiarized him with the biggest orchestral numbers, and the effects to be produced in presenting these numbers.

December 1925 (M) JAMES F. THOMAS is the organist of the Albee Theatre in Providence, Rhode Island. His personality is so genial and friendly that Jim has become one of the most popular citizens of that city he now calls home. No matter how good a musician, or capable an organist he may be, his usefulness to himself, his theatre, and his community can always be increased by a reasonable amount of wholesome friendliness and congeniality.

Thomas plays practically all of his programs from memory. He has such an extensive repertoire of suitable music that very seldom he needs to have recourse to the printed page. New numbers he finds suitable are memorized and filed away with the old standbys and brought forth deftly when the occasion demands.

He has been an organist for 15 years, and previously directed orchestras in western cities and in New York at the Broadway Theatre. He played extended engagements at the Newark Theatre, in Chicago, Denver and on the Pacific Coast.

When he came to Providence, John Philip Sousa learned that he was playing at a theatre there, and wrote a letter to the manager, congratulating him on having secured Mr. Thomas as organist, and saying, "I have known Mr. Thomas for a number of years and have a very high regard for him, both as a musician and as a man." This was especially pleasing to Thomas, because he harbors a very ardent admiration for Sousa. In fact, he has named one of his sons after the famous March King.

July 1926 (M) FRANK GALLAGHER, "The Little Irish Organist," is the very successful and capable artist in Loew's Doan Theatre in Cleveland. He has the unusual distinction of having played the first organ installed in a theatre anywhere, which was the