

Letters To The Editor

Dear Editor:

The article of Mr. Herb Merritt, in your issue of January 1988, on cleaning organ pipes, is perhaps the neatest expression of the love of the beauty of the organ pipe as stands single or in mesmeric ranks in its various forms and shapes, but truly the aspect of finest jewelry design, ponderous yet delicate, an awesome sight, so that on first sight of experience of seeing one of these things, as I was at the age of 16, when right is the chemistry, changes life for one, completely and for life.

Bear with me when I tell you a little story about this one person, now 83, crippled and without speech because stroke a year ago, I first saw the Hill and Beard pipe organ at the chapel of Robert College, Constantinople, Turkey, in 1916.

It is a far away and involved story this, but from that moment on as I heard the first sounds coming from it as the student body attending a short, presbyterian service before classes, for the moment became secondary the purpose for which I had come, to learn something, as I begged Professor Charles Estes, the organist, to use me, to keep things clean up there with the pipes and the gorgeous console, and for the next four years as I slowly became a pretty good engineer, that pipe organ was my first love, as it came before everything else.

I graduated and migrated from Turkey to America, I entered the pioneering field of radio broadcasting, and in the interim I went in charge of every pipe organ broadcast concert on my radio station.

It was Charles Courboin, playing the residence organ of Charles M. Schwab in New York; I moved to Woolsey Hall and the now much composite instrument there, and one day I was supervising the microphone placements on a very fine organ in a cathedral. Slowly, the door to the pipe loft opened and out shuffled the dearest looking elderly man with dust all over his clothes; he had been tuning the organ for the occasion ... this was Harry Hall, the great architect of the Hall organ, native of Nottingham, England, with his factory near my area of engineering operation. I introduced myself to this great man, so softspoken as like one of his Aeolines, I came to know later, he caught onto my enthusiasm and asked, "Why don't you build one for your house?"

That was the magic question, for I neither expected such luck as where I could get help and facilities, but here it was, handed me on a platter.

For the next year, after making working arrangements with him, I would play hookey from my lucrative business as Harry and I used to sit in the sun in front

of his factory, whittle a little stick of sugar pine, and talk organs. At the end of the year, my house was full of ranks of pipes neatly stacked, the 16-footers and the Sifflotes, as the chests began to take shape, and one day it all came together in the attic of my home in 1938.

But soon the greater ambition of three manuals and something over 45 ranks, the itch to do this, as the small organ of 16 ranks outgrew the house as came the decision to build a new house, with a balcony and all that, this time, the house to be built around the organ.

We designed the house and started to build it but the first requisite was that the organ loft must be finished first, for by the time the house was finished, the organ must be secure in its place. For this, we built the new chests at Harry's place and in proper schedule, we opened the new house, with organ in its permanent place, three manuals, 45 ranks, with 12 ranks of reeds, as the whole became the facility, where the past quarter of a century have come organists, AGO and all manner of artistry doing the thing we enjoy most.

But Harry Hall, that great contemporary of Ernest Skinner and Moller, died, but he had left me with a heritage so precious as to teach me his art of the chest mechanisms, his delicate but assertive voicing, as he charged me near death, to watch over his precious vintage organs all over the place.

These organs became old and neglected by some churches, but as I promised Harry Hall, I myself collected around me students of the same injection of enthusiasm, particularly one Bradford Elker, your subscriber who brought me your latest magazine, and with this group of my own students headed by Elker, we have thus far rebuilt several of his instruments on a cost plus something-for-the-boys basis, which does not make us very popular with commercial builders, but our work is equal to the best they have to offer and then some, as Harry Hall vintage instruments will live yet for more generations, refurbished, often augmented and in fine shape.

It was one of these, as I personally crafted all the chests and gave St. Mark's of Bridgeport a new organ, just as I declared the instrument ready for its first concert, I was struck down with stroke and lost my speech ... and that's where it stands for me now.

But I began this letter to you with admiration of the thoughts, the competence and love so evident of your Mr. Merritt, I love every word of what he has written for it virtually exhudes intense love and knowledge of the instrument and pipes to

gladden the hearts of all who are in love with this thing.

There have been some pompous upstarts, imports from Europe, who have theorized and written, urging that pipe laden with the grime of time, be left alone, "for it is the patina of this mess which IMPROVE the sound of pipes" and I have never heard a bigger pomposity or lie, for patina or no patina, no pipe mouth laden with junk of time, speaks as well as its voicer intended. There is nothing more beautiful than a clean, gleaming rank of organ pipes with all the evidence of time and natural zinc in the Montres, often becomes uniformly mottled in the browns and the olive greens and the like, which renders these more beautiful to the eyes that love them.

Pipe organ service is a very lucrative way of making a living but in all these years of my own involvement with the organ, I have seen a criminal element indeed, who with little interest in the artistry of it, with a smattering of tinsmithing, have virtually destroyed some of the new pipeworks of masters of the art. A brief account of one such I cried over, as Holtkamp had installed a beautiful instrument in a nearby church, with shiny, copper resonators of the 8-ft. rank of a reed.

Holtkamp, finished with his beautiful work, had departed and the church was approached by a nearby "tin monger" posing as curator of some important pipe organs in nearby universities and such, and he was given the job to maintain the Holtkamp organ.

I visited the church with great anticipation of inspecting that fine organ for observation of some of Holtkamp's clever applications of his craft.

I looked and saw in horror what the BUTCHER had done to those copper resonators of those once beautiful shapes of the eight-foot Trumpets.

Apparently he could not manage to tune to a lower cent in the traditional manner, and he had taken the tops of the pipes and squunched them with his hand like he might have done with one of his beer cans, and there stood that beautiful rank, reduced to an unbelievable ugliness.

Thus, my final and appreciative comment on the article by Mr. Merritt. There is nothing quite like the perfection of a long, continuous seam of a solder joint of the master craftsman, the good pipe maker almost a vanishing profession, but it is most gratifying that we can still read well-written accounts about them.

Sincerely yours,
Dr. Garo Willard Ray
Orange, Connecticut

continued...

Letters To The Editor

(continued)

Dear Editor:

In response to John W. (Bill) Fischer's request for information on the Fischer Theater and its pipe organ (Sept./Oct. 1987, page 5), the building has been slated for demolition but a citizen's group is hoping for its preservation, and I am happy to give the following "progress report."

The Fischer Theater, now 104 years old, was originally Henley's Grand Opera House. It is still structurally sound with fine acoustics, beautiful box seats, an orchestra pit, a stage, and a marquee. It was once the showcase for such local stars and stars-to-be as Dick and Jerry VanDyke, Bobby Short, Donald O'Connor and Gene Hackman.

Early this year the owners of the building deeded the building to the city of Danville and the mayor is receptive to the idea of its restoration IF DONE BY PRIVATE FUNDING. (If the project doesn't show promise, the building will be torn down for a parking lot!)

The plans are to convert it to a performing arts center for stage performances of all kinds. No such facility is available in east central Illinois or the west central Indiana area (the closest being the Long Center in Lafayette, Indiana).

Last month a meeting was announced and more than 150 people attended and expressed their support. The immediate goal is to raise \$1 million to provide a firm base for public and corporate fundraising. All donations are tax-deductible and donations of \$1,000 or more would be payable over three years. Donors' names will be recognized on plaques, an honor roll, and brass plates on individual seats. Major donors may have opera boxes or the box office named after them.

The Vermilion County Heritage Foundation, Box 926, Danville, IL 61832 (a 501 (c) (3) [application pending] charitable organization) has been created as the organization to spearhead a broad-based community fund drive. Funds are desperately needed NOW. The building has stood empty without heating and other utilities for the past six years and there is considerable water damage and general deterioration of the delicate ornamental details.

I personally have expressed an interest and have offered my support of a committee that would try to get an organ for the Fischer. (The original has "disappeared.") As President of our local Illiana Organaires, I have written repeatedly to the Danville *Commercial-News* expressing our interest in the restoration of the building and our wish for an organ there.

It is going to be a long, hard struggle but hopefully the endeavor will be suc-

cessful. Who knows? Maybe someday there will be an ATOS chapter in Danville! (That wouldn't stop our attendance at CIC-ATOS functions, however!)

I would appreciate your mentioning our "project" in the hopes of gaining additional support.

Sincerely,
Joan A. Griffis (Mrs. Wm. R.)
Danville, Illinois

Dear Editor:

As President of Buffalo Area Chapter I have been asked by the membership to comment on the content of Concert and Convention reviews in the ATOS Journal. The membership and I feel that the reviews in the Journal are totally counter-productive to our Society's goals. While we all profess to have an interest in promoting the theatre organ, I see no positive motive in running down artists or chapters that are trying to present concerts. While an individual concert may not be to the reviewer's liking, many others attending may have enjoyed the music. The true test of an artist's ability is reflected in future concert attendance. Do these reviewers truly believe that their personal opinions, when put in print, will make an artist play any better? If they do, they certainly have an inflated opinion of themselves.

I am sure that if some of these reviewers would try spending countless hours restoring an organ or spend hours preparing a concert for an organ that they may never have even seen, much less played, they might have a little respect for the amount of effort expended. Remember that the people working on the organ are usually donating their time and money, and the artist you are criticizing is just trying to make a living. How would you feel if someone wrote to your local newspaper and condemned your job performance?

We are constantly fighting numerous problems in attempting to increase exposure of the theatre organ: theatre owners, lack of funds to restore organs, poor attendance at concerts, etc. What we do not need is our own members running down the very people who are trying to bring this wonderful music to us. I ask you, please, to think of the theatre organ before you make these negative comments in the future. THE ORGAN DESERVES BETTER.

Sincerely,
Craig Whitley
Holland, New York

Dear Editor:

In reference to "Cleaning Organ Pipes" by Herb Merritt (THEATRE ORGAN, January/February 1988).

Mr. Merritt has a misconception of Hoyt metal as used by Wurlitzer. I was

told, in person, by one who was an official in theatre organs when they were current, that Hoyt metal was a special alloy used for air-conductor piping because it was fairly light-weight, strong and solderable, and it wouldn't rust. It is also non-magnetic. Wurlitzer never made tone pipes from it.

Sincerely,
Earl G. Gilbert
Getzville, New York

Opinions expressed in this column are those of the correspondents, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the editors or the policies of ATOS or THEATRE ORGAN. Letters concerning all aspects of the theatre organ hobby are welcome. Unless clearly marked "not for publication" letters may be published in whole or in part.

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