

Fans' 10-year Project Puts Civic Center Organ in Full Voice Again

by Edgar Williams, *Inquirer* Staff Writer

The name of the song was "Ol' Man River," and the pipe organ conveyed it quickly to the farthest corners of Convention Hall in the Civic Center yesterday. And when the song was ended, the organist was beaming.

"This," Lowell Ayars said, "is a remarkable instrument."

Ayars, 73, long one of the best-known organists in the area, had come to the imposing hall at 34th Street and Civic Center Boulevard to check on the comeback of one of Philadelphia's greatest — but least-known — musical treasures: the huge, 90-rank Moller organ that, back in the days of national political conventions at the hall, almost literally rocked the place when the organist cut loose.

In the early 1950s — only a few years after it was used for a particularly stirring rendition of "Stars and Stripes Forever" in honor of President Harry S. Truman at the 1948 National Democratic Convention — the organ fell virtually silent because its innards had been allowed to fall into disrepair. The silence lasted more than 30 years.

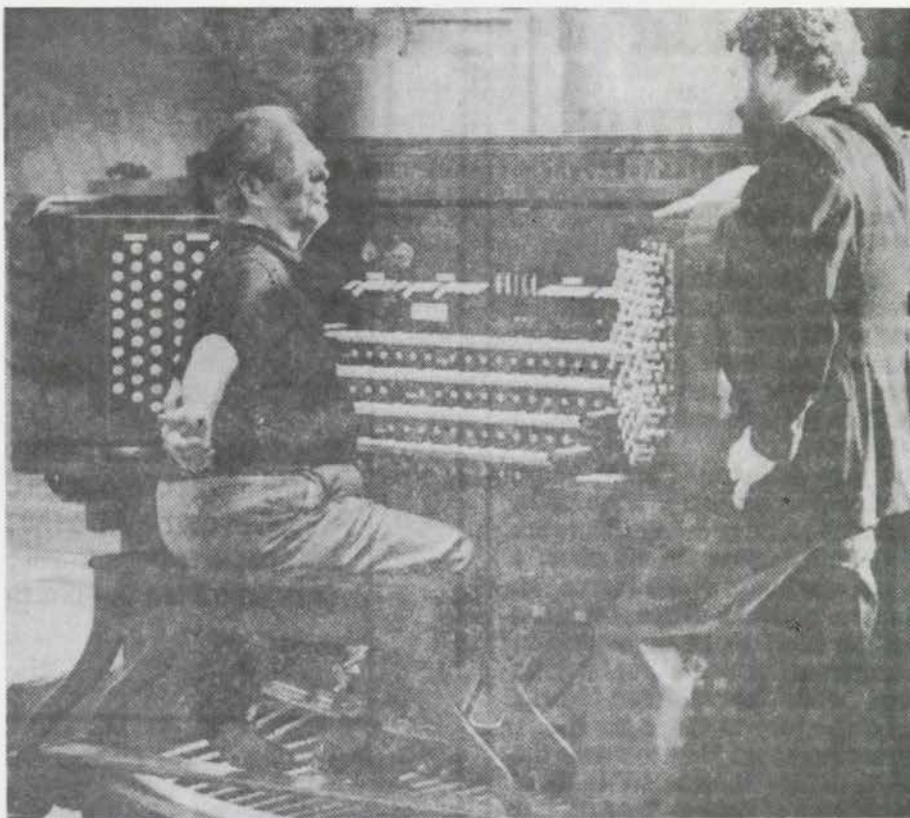
But now the big voice is back in Convention Hall and the place is rocking again, thanks to a volunteer effort of herculean proportions.

For more than 10 years, members of the Delaware Valley Chapter of the American Theatre Organ Society have been working on the restoration of the organ. Finally, on Sunday, when graduation exercises of Drexel University were held in the hall, the organ was heard officially for the first time in its resurrection.

"It was particularly moving to hear 13,000 people sing the national anthem, to the accompaniment of the organ," said Jim Breneman of Phoenixville, crew chief since December of the restoration team. "I guarantee you, most of them sang better than they ever had sung before."

Breneman, 41, is the owner of the Colonial Theater in Phoenixville. Some years ago, he installed the organ from the old State Theater, 52nd and Chestnut Streets in West Philadelphia, in the Colonial. He is, by his own reckoning, a thoroughgoing organ buff.

"From December until April," Breneman said, "we didn't turn on the organ at all. In May, we really fired up, and the noise was something to hear. Everything worked, but we had to tune it."



Lowell Ayars (left) and Irvin R. Glazer at the organ's console.

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Installed in 1931, when Convention Hall was opened, this is one of the nation's great orchestral-concert organs. Although considerably smaller than the organ in the John Wanamaker store in Center City, which is one of the largest in the world, and the one in the Irvine Auditorium on the campus of the University of Pennsylvania, it still is a big one.

For the city, the restoration represents what may be the biggest bargain since William Penn sold building lots in Center City. In return for paying \$30,000 for the necessary materials, the city gets a professional-caliber job for free.

"This restoration job would run about \$300,000 if you had to pay for the labor," said Irvin R. Glazer of Springfield, Delaware County, a theatre-organ society member who is the project manager. "Also, this means the restoration of future maintenance of an instrument that cost \$100,000 in 1931 and would cost at least \$500,000 today."

Glazer, president emeritus of the Theatre Historical Society of America, based in Chicago, is not an organist himself. But he is another thoroughgoing buff.

To grasp the immensity of the project, it is necessary to understand that the organ has two consoles, one on each side of the orchestra pit at the east end of Convention Hall, and both on hydraulic lifts.

The Console to the left is a concert, or classical, organ of 70 ranks of pipes, which is also able to activate portions of the theatre organ, whose console is to the right and has 20 ranks of pipes that make theatre-type music.

High above the stage is the "real" organ — a total of more than 9,000 pipes; the organ chambers (four tightly-sealed rooms, each 30 feet by 30 feet) and the organ blower.

There is still some tidying-up to be done in the project. The restoration team works every Saturday, and its members come from many professions.

"When we come in here, though" said Harry Linn, 67, of Media, an engineer who is president of the theatre organ society's Delaware Valley Chapter, "we're all pipe-organ people."



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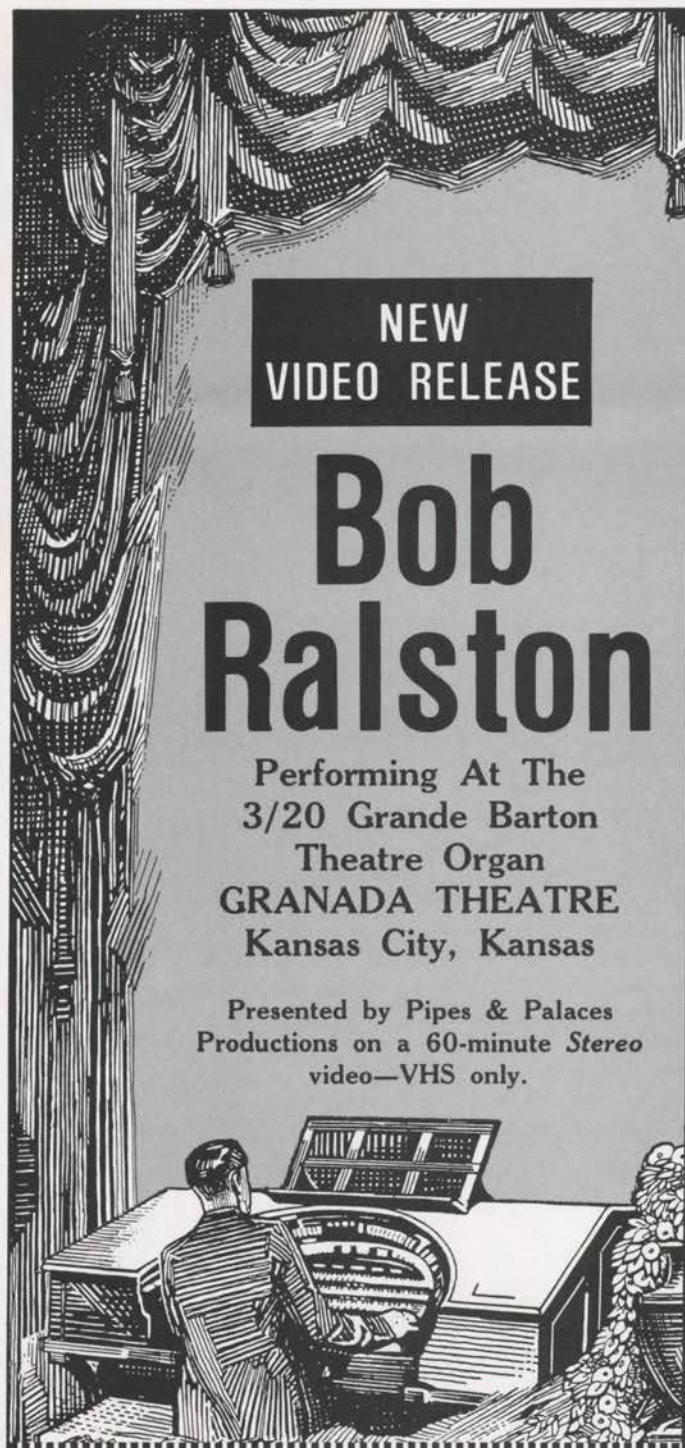
The huge, 90-rank Moller organ at the Convention Hall in the Civic Center is being played again after volunteers spent 10 years restoring it. The instrument had fallen into disrepair after it was last used in the early 1950s.



"The most difficult things written by one perfectly versed in the difficulties of the keyboard are far easier to play than the easiest things conceived by an amateur."

ROBERT SCHUMANN (1810-56)

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