

# Detroit's Magnificent Wurlitzer

*by Don Jenks and Scott Smith*

*Sixty years ago, on November 11, 1928,  
the Fisher Theater in Detroit was introduced to a glittery opening night  
audience, with many of the city's elite in attendance.*

*On that evening, the one-of-a-kind, 4/34 Wurlitzer pipe organ  
was dedicated, with Arthur Gutow at the console.*

**Happy Birthday to the Detroit Theater Organ Club's Wurlitzer organ!**



Stage view of the Senate Theater, home of the Detroit Theater Organ Club. The Wurlitzer grand piano that appears at right spent its first thirty years in an organ chamber, and is one of only five such grands ever connected by the firm to one of their organ consoles.

Photo by Terence B.H. Sims

The seven Fisher brothers had operated a business in Detroit for many years, building carriages intended to be drawn by horses. In the early days of the horseless carriage, they were naturals to build wooden bodies for these new-fangled inventions. Same business, different mode of propulsion. Their success was such that the fledgling General Motors Corporation offered to purchase their booming business. A deal was struck, and the Fisher Brothers became instantly wealthy and joined the list of local elite.

During the boom times of the twenties, the Fisher brothers commissioned Albert Kahn, a notable Detroit architect, to design a skyscraper for the New Center area of Detroit, near Grand Boulevard and Woodward, to be called The Fisher Building. Kahn's proposal called for a building with a 28-floor central tower flanked by two smaller towers. The building was to be a landmark, which would include marble from all over the world, and frescoed ceilings by world famous artists. Work began on this architectural wonder, and, in the fall of 1928, the first phase opened. Its beauty brought awe to many who came just to look, as well as those who came to conduct business. However, the Depression struck before the entire building could be completed, and only the central tower and part of the lower portions of the building were ever built.

The Fisher Building included the Fisher Theater, a large movie/vaudeville house of about 3,500 seats designed by Mayger & Graven, which included the latest of stage and projection equipment. The theatre was of Mayan-Incan Indian design, complete with gods, bizarre garish colors, beamed ceilings and fountains containing goldfish. On opening night there were even live birds in the lobby befitting the part of the world from which the decor was taken.

Arsene Siegel of Chicago was commissioned to design a Wurlitzer pipe organ for the new theatre. He was told to conceive an organ which was capable of presenting both classical and theatrical music with equal effectiveness and beauty. The organ was to be a memorial to the parents of the Fisher brothers. Siegel's design created Opus 1953, a Wurlitzer organ with specifications somewhat different than any other ever built. But, true to the assignment, the organ is equally at home sounding out a Bach fugue as it is with "Tiptoe Through the Tulips."

Siegel's unusual concept of this instrument began with the console stop-rail layout. Instead of the conventional Wurlitzer design where like voices from several chambers appeared together at the same pitch, this console sorted the tablets first by manual, then by chamber, then by pitch and finally by voice within that chamber. This means that within the Great manual stop-rail, the tablets are grouped by chamber, then placed in the normal Wurlitzer sequence. Confusing? For many organists, it has driven them crazy. Efficient? Yes, after getting used to it. Especially if the organist desires individual control of the four pipe chambers.

Additionally, Siegel created subtle differences in the complement of voices he included in this instrument. Incorporated in his specifications are such goodies as Cor Anglais, Quintadena, Celeste, Dulciana and Unda Maris, and an independent 16' wood Open Diapason. Most theatre organs did not include all of these voices. The Chrysoglott was designed to become an excellent Vibraphone at the flick of the proper stop tablet. A Wurlitzer grand piano was included with the necessary equipment to allow dynamic expression, just as a human stroking the keys. No keyless wonder in the chamber for this special instrument.

The Fisher Theater became an all movie house, just as most other vaudeville theatres, after the advent of sound. The organ was used for many years for Friday night intermissions, played by the great Don Miller. Broadcasts on radio station WJR whose home is in "The Golden Tower of the Fisher Building" were a regular entertainment staple in Detroit.

But, suddenly the death knell sounded! A wrecking ball appeared on the horizon! This great movie house was to be closed, and the space gutted for construction of a "new" legitimate playhouse for Broadway productions presented by the Nederlander organization. New Years Eve, December 31, 1960, this movie house was to close forever.

Lurking around the Fisher from time to time was George Orbits, a local organ buff. George had coveted the beautiful organ in the theatre, and long had dreamed of having it in his home. He had earlier installed the 3/6 Wurlitzer from the Lancaster Theatre in Lincoln Park, Michigan, in his basement and longed for a larger instrument. The answer was always the same. "George, if the organ is ever put up for sale, we'll call you."

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Suddenly, the manager called George for a bid on the organ. George had earlier heard that a bid of \$10,000 had been submitted by someone on the West Coast. He explained to the manager that he didn't have \$10,000 to match the bid. The best he could do was \$4,000. The manager said that he would enter that bid. George gave up. A few days later the manager called him at work. "George, bring me your check and come pick up your organ." That night George staggered home and into his kitchen, flopped on a chair and could only mutter, "What have I done? What have I done?" The Fisher Brothers had elected to accept less for the instrument and keep this memorial to their parents in the Detroit area.

Work began to remove this 32-ton, 2,297-pipe monster. George would work at his regular job all day, then go to the theatre and dismantle organ, bring home a trailer load of pipes, arriving at 3 a.m., get an hour or two of sleep and start again the next day. Finally, a few local

organ buffs heard of this solitary effort and pitched in. They were always one step ahead of the wrecking crew. In fact, the Solo chamber almost came down with the walls. The relay was almost lost. But, this little crew prevailed, and by the end of March 1961, the organ was finally safe in a public warehouse.

By this time, George realized that if the organ were to be installed in his house, he and his family would have to move out. It was just too big. Someone suggested forming a theatre organ club to use the organ until George could install it in his home. The Detroit Theater Organ Club was born. At the initial meeting in April 1961, there was a long discussion as to whether there were 65 people in the city of Detroit willing to pay \$5.00 a month to belong to a theatre organ club.

There were. And today this club which was formed so long ago on such a tenuous dream exists.

This intrepid group leased the Iris Theatre, an old vaudeville house on Detroit's east side, for \$200 per month, heated, and began installation of the organ. The organ was really shoehorned into the theatre with the chambers across the back of the balcony, the 25 HP blower crowbarred into the projection booth, and the combination action relay stuffed into the theatre office below. One did not listen to the organ here; it enveloped you. Imagine, an organ designed for a 3,500-seat palace sounding forth in a little 750-seat shoebox.

Within a year, there were not enough seats in the Iris. In addition, the plaster was falling down from the monumental sound created therein. A search was undertaken for a new home. Where does one find a suitable theatre for the organ when there is no money available? From a tax sale, of course. The Senate Theatre had been closed about 1955 and seized by the city for non-payment of property taxes. The size was right, and the building fireproof. It had to be. The basement was full of water. An offer of \$1,000 at the annual tax sale proved to be sufficient to buy the property, and suddenly the club was the proud owner of a derelict building.

In December 1962, shortly after the deed to this "architectural treasure" was in the club's hands, a small group went to the theatre to secure it. It was cold!! Dave Voydanoff's pipe was the only source of warmth in the building. We had to go outside to get warm. George Aston had rigged up one work light. Suddenly, Ted Amano pointed up and said, "We have more than one light. There is a light on in the attic." Dave looked up, took the pipe out of his mouth and muttered, "Light, hell! That's a star up there." There was a large hole in the roof.

Work began, and finally in 1964, the first concert with Ashley Miller at the console was held in the new facility. It was a great night! Born that night was a concept which has been copied by many groups around the country. The Detroit Theater Organ Club has survived the ups and downs of the Pizza Parlor era, television and VCR eras, Rock and Roll, and all of the other perils of the entertainment industry.

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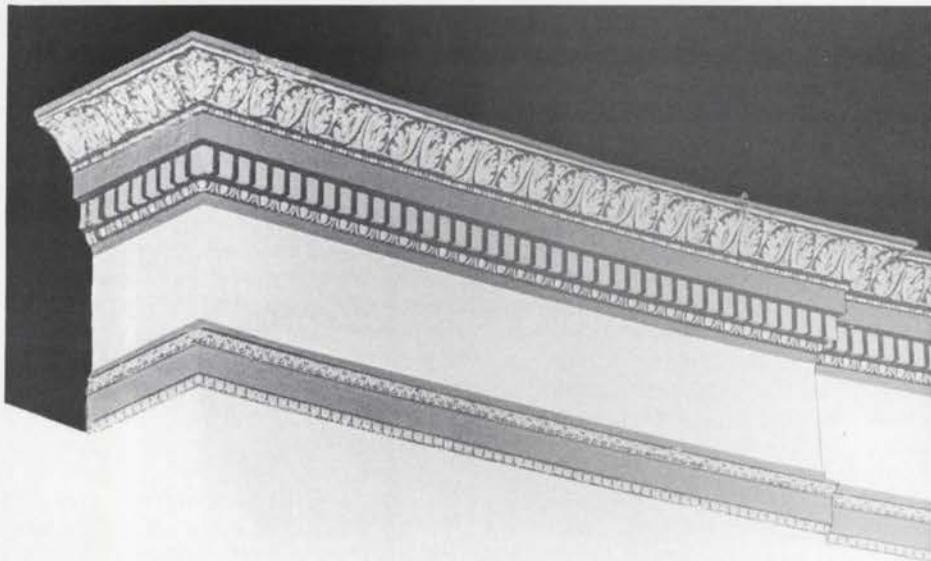
Over the years, the organ has been lovingly cared for by a small crew of experts. The integrity of Arsene Siegel's original specifications and design has been maintained. The console case, which matched the gaudy Aztec theatre interior, is complete with its Mayan gods, including a fierce, coiled snake on the music rack to protect the unwary organist from harm. This ornate case was carefully restored in the 1970s by skilled

artists. Voicing and regulation have been honed to their finest edge. This has made this Wurlitzer one of the premier instruments in the world. Many recordings have been made on this instrument by noted artists from all over. The Fisher Brothers can be proud of their decision to leave the organ in the care of Detroiters.

The Senate Theatre has also been cared for in an equally careful manner. In 1988, a major redecoration project was completed which has transformed the auditorium to a house worthy of the instrument it contains. The organ is installed on the original stage of the theatre, with percussions in the two original chambers which housed some long-departed instrument. The console and grand piano sit on a new stage constructed in the position of the orchestra pit.

Concerts are held monthly by world-famous artists and are open to the club members and their guests. Because of the chamber design, it is possible to conduct a tour of the organ chambers after each concert, an activity which has done much to generate interest. Playing time on the organ is available to members and their guests, and this has allowed many to fulfill a dream of being able to have time at the console of a large organ.

Anyone who is interested in seeing or playing this instrument is welcome. A call to the theatre will provide a telephone number from which arrangements can be made. We hope to see many friends from all over when in Detroit, and for the 1989 convention.



*Close-up view of main cornice in the recently restored and renovated Senate Theatre.  
Photo by Terence B.H. Sims, Detroit*

Title page photo:

*The main auditorium of Detroit's Fisher Theater as it appeared eight months after opening, on July 25, 1929. The four-manual Wurlitzer console is seen here silhouetted by footlights at the left of the orchestra pit. Photo appears courtesy of Manning Brothers, Detroit*