

Kay McAbee: Prime Judge For The 1990 Young Organist Competition

by Dorothy VanSteenkiste

Inducted into the American Theatre Organ Society's Hall of Fame at the 1985 Convention in Chicago, Kay McAbee has credentials that are very impressive and his mastery of the theatre organ is evidence of his playing skills.

His early training, at age five, on the piano and then, age twelve, at the organ led him to become church organist at age thirteen. While in high school he attended an anniversary week program at the Rialto Theatre in Joliet. The stage show used the 4/21 Grande Barton Theatre Pipe Organ. At one hearing, he was "hooked" on the theatre organ sound.

After graduation from high school in 1950, he attended the Chicago Musical College and later, the American Conservatory of Music. While at the American Conservatory he became staff organist for the W.W. Kimball Company and also for the famous Kimball Hall. He traveled extensively playing concerts for both Kimball and Conn.

It was not until 1953 that Kay played his first theatre organ. It was a 3/14 Wurlitzer in the Paramount Theatre in Aurora, Illinois. He thoroughly enjoyed his times at that console — until just a year later, in 1954, a flood interrupted the flow of music. Not wanting to be kept from this "new" sound, and with the help of several friends, he rebuilt the organ. Once it was in playing condition, Kay cut his first record, called "Organ Echoes."



Kay McAbee

While all this was going on, Kay was accompanist for several Choral Societies and was a guest artist at Orchestra Hall. In 1958, Kay and his friends rebuilt the organ that 'began' his theatre organ career — the one he had heard in the Rialto in 1948. That one had also been damaged by water.

During the 1960s his reputation as a

theatre organist brought him many honors, including concert engagements at both of the theatres where he had rebuilt the organs, plus the Coronado Rockford (4/17 Barton). He was also staff organist for the Trianon Ballroom in Chicago (3/13 Wurlitzer). In 1960 he was asked to demonstrate the new 2/8 Wicks Theatre Organ at the Music Trade Show at the Palmer House in Chicago. He was also asked to play many classical concerts in the mid-west. Of these, the most notable for Kimball fans, was the concert at the First Congregational Church in Chicago (4/95 Kimball).

Kay has been a featured artist for at least five ATOS National Conventions. He has played concerts for many organ clubs including, Rochester Theatre Organ Society, Detroit Theater Organ Club, and many ATOS Chapter-sponsored events.

Currently Kay is house organist at the Ramada Classic Hotel in Albuquerque, New Mexico, presiding at the only five-manual Kimball Theatre Organ console that Kimball ever made (originally the center console in the Roxy Theatre in NYC).

In the Chicago Area he is often called "Mr. Kimball." Kay is known to bring out the full resources of the organ and for his ability to "play to the audience."

We are honored to have Kay McAbee as our prime judge.



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