

The four-manual Estey "Cash Register" console. No subliminal messages were found to have been spelled out on the lighted buttons.

DeLay photos



Combination action setters. All are in magnificent condition.

The Forgotten Estey

by Thomas L. DeLay

In the teens and twenties of this century, no large city was complete without a city-owned municipal or civic auditorium. Across the country, many such venues were to be found, often with large pipe organs. In some cases, even sites such as opera houses could be considered as a civic venture. Such sites included, San Francisco, Portland, Maine and Oregon, Denver, Minneapolis, Memphis, and of course the huge Midmer-Losh in the Atlantic City Convention Hall.

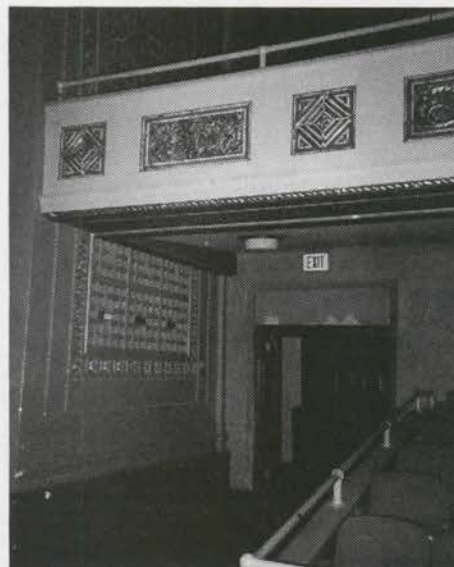
In 1927, the City of Sacramento was no exception to this. They purchased a 4-manual, 49-rank Estey organ. At best, the organ is designed along the tonal ideals of an "Orchestral" organ. It is not by any imagination a theatre organ, nor, in the strictest sense, is it a classical organ. Perhaps the term "concert organ" best describes it.

The city built the 4500-seat Memorial Auditorium as a multiple use facility. The entire main floor is on an immense elevator that can lower to act as an arena, or raise up and be used for basketball games or for extra house seating. The organ console is also on a separate elevator.

The Estey organ installed within has that curious console design known as a "cash register" console. A push of the stop knob and the voice comes on and is indicated by lighting of the face of the stop knob/button. In theory, it is a very neat and compact idea. The stop button faces also illuminate when the sforzando or crescendo pedal is activated. At a glance, the organist would know what was registered — as long as a strong

spotlight did not shine on the console and wash out the reading of the stop buttons! It is believed that this may be the only intact example of a 4-manual Estey "cash register" organ playable in the United States. One thing for certain, the organ is virtually untouched by organ "improvers" or more modern stop redesign. From this standpoint, it certainly has some historical merit.

The Memorial Auditorium did, strangely enough, open with a large stage production and movie. The Auditorium is equipped with a projection and spotlight room at the rear center of the top balcony. There are, in a sense, two large balconies; one is slightly above main floor level, and the second is above that. Both extend



Grille openings to the upper and lower balcony. On both sides of the house, these openings are nailed shut as it was thought the organ would be too loud.

in a U-shape from one side of the proscenium arch to the other. The organ, in addition to chamber openings in a floor to ceiling format, also has openings into these balconies. Supposedly, the organ was too loud to patrons in these areas and, as a result, have been blocked off. This has limited the tonal egress of the organ by as much as 50%. The shutter openings are still intact, merely crudely nailed shut!

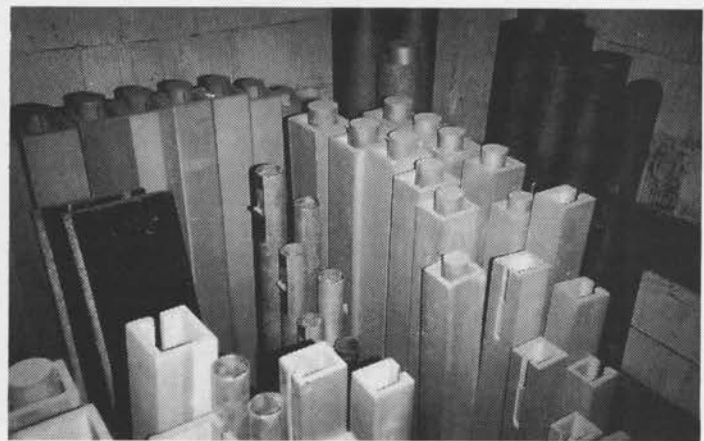
The organ has, in recent years, been used very little. The auditorium itself has been closed for much of the last 8-10 years. Reasons for this involve a paranoia for California seismic safety, but perhaps more important is the opening (circa 8-10 years ago) of the new 20,000-seat arena, "surplusing" the old "decrepit" Memorial Auditorium. The City of Sacramento has done a magnificent job of maintaining the venerable old building even during its closed periods, and it is in magnificent condition. The place looks as though it might have closed just yesterday. Though not in use, the building is regularly "exercised," with attention to see that all parts are in operable condition.



ELEPHANT MEETS PIPE ORGAN! During a circus some years ago, the animals went on a rampage — the Estey's main wind line was pierced the elephants' tusks.



Bottoms of the lowest five 16' Pedal Trombones. Unenclosed, they are the BIG foundation of the organ. Behind them can be seen the large Pedal 16' Open Wood Diapasons.



A forest of Haskell bass pipes in the Choir Organ. 16' labial Fagotto is to the right rear.

One bizarre fact is that this venerable old Estey survivor is probably the only organ in the country to have its main windline damaged by elephants! Such was the case one evening while a circus was performing on the main floor above. The elephants were corralled in the basement, waiting to be brought up to the main floor via the freight elevators. The animals went into a frenzy and rammed their tusks through the main blower windline! The holes remain to this day.

For some time it has been assumed the organ was unplayable. And it was — due to water damage in a conduit feeding the 20 horsepower blower with 3-phase power. One leg was open and to prevent the motor from damage, all service to the blower and twin D.C. current generators was disconnected. For the first time in 10 years, Sierra Chapter member Hal Wilmunder ran temporary wiring to start the blowers and see what would work. The organ came back to life with only three ciphers. With considerable stimulation of the manual key contacts, oxidation burned through and the long silent organ became very reasonably playable. It certain had holes in some

stops, but for not having been played for so long, it was in remarkable condition. The reed stops proved to be superb. All true reeds were built by Gottfried. The Pedal 16' Trombone is literally the foundation of the entire full organ. While none of the reeds can be considered brilliant, they all tend to add an orchestral flavor. The many string stops are beautiful, particularly the 3-rank string chorus in the Solo division. The unenclosed Solo Ophicleide is the single loudest stop in the organ and is unified at 16-8-4. As an instrument, it is well worth preservation as an orchestral organ.

Through the years many organists have played the Estey. Most notably, Mr. Leland Ralph, Ethel Brett, and, of course, Emil Martin. Save for a brief moment of rejuvenation in 1980 when it was last played, it has remained silent for most of the last 15 years. Emil Martin, of course, has long been a favorite at the Arden Pizza and Pipes in Sacramento.

Why all the fuss about the Auditorium and the Estey? Plans are afoot to gut the auditorium. The organ is in the way of the auditorium makeover. At present, the house has, for organ, magnificent acous-

tics with 3-4 seconds reverb. The new design calls for a heavily padded auditorium installed within the walls of the old house, stripping out all vestiges of architecture from the 1920s. Even if the Estey were retained, the organ would speak into a 2500-seat auditorium designed by today's standards — acoustically dead nightmares that require many thousands of dollars worth of amplification so even a sneeze might be heard. By 1992, the old Memorial Auditorium and its Estey may become only a distant memory.

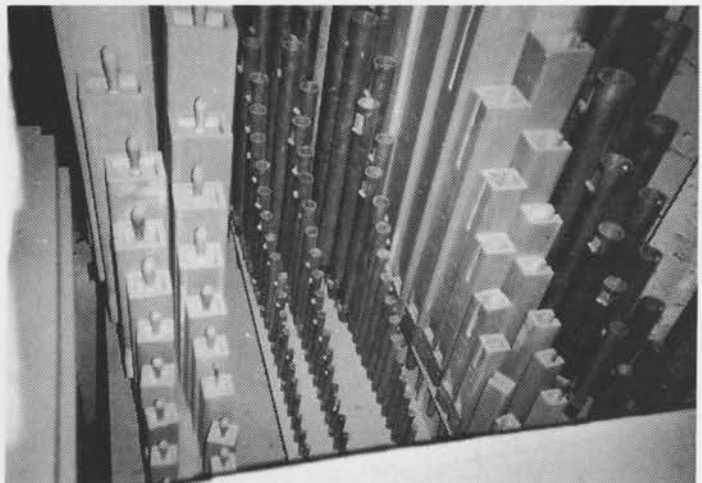
If there might be interest in trying to persuade the City of Sacramento to preserve the organ, please write a note to "SAVE THE ORGAN" giving your name and address to:

Mr. Solon (Doc) Wisham
Assistant City Manager
City of Sacramento, City Hall, No. 101
915 "I" Street
Sacramento, California 95814-2684

(Credits: Hal Wilmunder, Emil Martin, A. Scott Nelson, Dean of Sacramento Chapter of AGO, William O. Schlotter of Nor-Cal ATOS for showing interest in the Estey above and beyond the call of duty.)



Tops of the Haskell 16' Great Open Diapason pipes. Great tuba and 8' Open #1 can be seen in the back.



Part of the powerful, unenclosed Great. Left to right, Tibia Clausa, three-rank Mixture, Tibia Plena, 4' Octave.