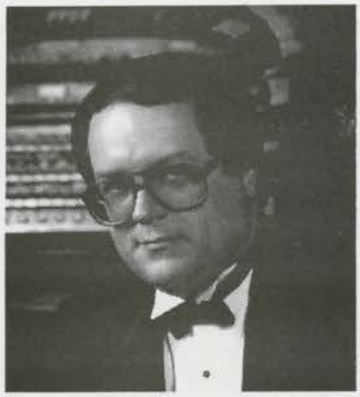

Pipes & *Synths*

by Charlie Balogh

In this age of fast changes in the music industry, I felt that I wanted to express some of my own thoughts and observations on various aspects of the theatre organ as it relates to the myriad of electronic instruments that are becoming a major part of today's music scene. My motivation for this article stems in part from a shorter article by Alden Stockebrand (September/October 1989), and a desire to promote a better understanding of why some of my colleagues and I have chosen to begin integrating these new instruments into our theatre organ presentations.

For the past 16 years, I've been performing in a pipe organ-equipped restaurant. This has given me some insight into how the public views our favorite instrument. Playing a theatre organ for John Q. Public is an enlightening experience in comparison to playing for people who are already familiar with theatre organ music. This is especially apparent with young people who will sometimes let you know in graphic terms whether you are entertaining them. Most people, however, are greatly impressed upon hearing the instrument for the first time. And this first impression is an initial step in gaining the modern listener's interest in the theatre organ. But there is a point at which this potential theatre organ enthusiast may lose interest.

Radio, TV, and other types of mass media unfortunately condition a large portion of the public into a pattern of music listening which encompasses only a small segment of the world's music output — a segment in which the sounds and rhythms are incredibly dynamic. So . . . if the public doesn't hear those things with which they are already familiar and comfortable, their initial enthusiasm for the organ may begin to wane. Therefore, we are challenged to keep their interest so they will actively seek more in the way of theatre organ music. The inherent value of today's music can and will be debated for decades. It is unfortunate that all forms of music are not presented and promoted equally. As a result, it's rather difficult to foster a new interest in the theatre organ considering the forces at work against us.

Today's music is decidedly percussive, rhythmic, and electronically dynamic. In some instances, it almost attacks the listener. Consequently, when this music is performed on the pipe organ, some of that excitement is lost in translation, so to speak, because of the slower response time which is characteristic of pipe organ sound. In order to afford the theatre organ that apparent musical punch and mainstream appeal, some new technologies are being incorporated into its presentation.

SYNTHESIZERS!!! Apparently a dirty word in the theatre organ world. The word itself sounds cold and artificial. But rest assured, synthesizers are not the musical mutants or space age geeks that some people would have you believe. Admittedly, a lot of traditionalists are put off by synthesizers because of the weird and sometimes bizarre "bleeps," "Bloops," and "squawks" that these devices can create. Those sounds, however, are only a minute example of the almost infinite variety of sounds that are available to the musician who makes use of synthesizers. These instruments have seen great changes since the days of Wendy Carlos and her "Switched On Bach" recordings in the early 70s. The units of those days are musical dinosaurs compared with the "state-of-the-art" products appearing today. Modern day "synths," as they can be referred to, are incredibly sophisticated and beautiful sounding musical instruments. There are also many different types of synths available. However, they can be divided into three general categories: analog synths, digital synths, and digital samplers. Analog synths generate sound by means of one or more electronic tone oscillators. (Most electronic organs used this sytem before the advent of digital sound.) That sound is then bent, twisted, and generally turned inside out to produce the desired effect. This method is flexible and very usable but is oftentimes cumbersome and difficult in performance situations where quick changes in sound are required. Digital synths are a relatively recent innovation and represent an evolutionary step in synth technology. They use a computer-generated waveform which is sent through a series of modifiers called algorithims and then translated into sound by means of a digital-analog converter. This sytem affords the performer a great deal more creative freedom as opposed to an analog device. Digital synthesis is a general category in which many manufacturers have entries. Yamaha was the innovator in this field. Their keyboards make use of what they term "FM tone generation." Other companies have developed their own versions of "FM" in order to compete. But they all fall into the digital synthesis category. The third synth category is that of the digital sampler which is, in effect, a sonic camera. That is, it takes a snapshot of any sound, changes it into computer code, assigns it to a keyboard, and then converts it back to an audio signal when a key is played. This system makes it possible to recreate highly complex acoustic instrument sounds with an uncanny degree of realism. If you have the opportunity, give a listen to the piano sound on a Kurzweil keyboard. It is a phenomenal re-creation of a full-size concert grand. There are, of course, many other brands of samplers available which can produce the same quality of sound. The listener ultimately has to decide which one he prefers. (Affordability is also a factor). It is this technology which makes is possible to electronically create an entire orchestra which sounds incredibly real and vibrant. Any one of these instruments is immensely versatile. And they are becoming even more versatile and musical each year. Sometimes each month! Yamaha has recently introduced a new instrument which combines digital synthesis with digital sampling to create even more realism and flexibility for the performer. If given a chance, they can be a terrific addition to theatre organ sound.

Now we get to the problem of how to integrate all this electronic wizardry with pipes. There are three ways to control a synth while playing the organ. The first is very basic and cumbersome. This involves setting the synth keyboard directly on the music rack or some place where it can be reached and played with one or both hands. An awkward and uncomfortable situation when one considers the size of some theatre organ consoles. (I speak from first hand experience). The second method is more logical and practical. In this case, the synth is keyed electronically from the organ keyboard via a system called MIDI, (Musical Instrument Digital Interface). MIDI is a standardized computer code which was adopted by the makers of electronic instruments. This enables any electronic instrument from any manufacturer to communicate with others of the same type. The theatre organs which have had computer-based relays installed in them possess this ability and can "talk" to the new instruments so that they can be played directly from the organ keyboard. However, only a limited number of such organs exist at the present time. Which leads us to our third method of synth control, sequencing. So far, this is the most convenient form of control in use by organists who choose to avail themselves of synthesizer units. In this case, the performer utilizes a computer to play the synth automatically while he or she plays the organ. This is also a point of controversy with many listeners. (i.e. — "We didn't come to hear a computer, we came to hear the organist!"). What most listeners fail to realize is that the music being played by the computer was arranged and played by the organist originally. We've all heard the statement that a computer can only do what a human being tells it to do. Therefore, a computerized music sequence is, in essence, an electronic extension of a human performer. In this way, the performer is able to extend beyond the physical limit to two hands and two feet.

The process of arranging for pipe organ and synths is often challenging and time consuming. My own approach is one in which I view myself as a soloist with an orchestra, the synths being

the orchestra. I write the parts which the orchestra is going to play. I then play those parts into the computer's memory. This process is referred to as sequencing. The computer then acts as a conductor for the orchestra which is playing the music sequence I've written. It is most definitely not a tape recording! The computer actually plays the synth just as if I were physically playing the keys. This is a method of music production for which I have been truly thankful over the past few years. I have often been frustrated when arranging a piece of music for organ which is orchestral in nature or associated with a big band becuase there are always parts of the arrangement that must be left out in order to reduce the score down to a manageable arrangement for two hands and feet. And when I try to adapt the latest "Top 10 Hit" for the theatre organ alone, the resulting transcription is dull and vanilla sounding when compared to the original. But with synths, I now have the ability to make that arrangement as complete as my heart desires. Because of the computer's incredible amount of memory and ability to crunch numbers, I can also impart to the sequence nearly every bit of phrasing, nuance, and imagination which characterizes my playing style. It is very human sounding and not at all artificial or mechanical. In other words, it has become my music. In addition, I can combine synth sounds and pipe sounds to create new timbres which have been previously non-existent. This opens up a whole new realm of possibilities for registration that wouldn't have been possible otherwise.

I believe that the reason I became a theatre organist was because of my desire to literally "play" an orchestra. With the advent of these new synths, that goal comes closer to being reached. My intent is not to sublimate the theatre organ but to augment it and perhaps re-define the term "unit orchestra" with an eye on the 21st century. And so I sincerely hope it is clear to the reader at this point that an organist who uses computerized synths in his or her program is not merely playing "canned" music along with the organ, but actually adding an extra dimension of their talent to the performance.

There are a number of striking similarities between the organ and the synthesizer. So many of them in fact, that space limitations do not permit a complete discussion of all of them here. (Perhaps in a future article?) Hence, there is sufficient evidence to say that the theatre organ and the modern day synth are kissin' cousins! It might be said that Robert Hope-Jones, father of the theatre organ, and Robert Moog, designer of the Moog Synthesizer, had much in common with each other concerning their respective inventions. The only differences being the result of the times in which they did their work and the tools available to them. Some interesting food for thought.

So far I've focused on the external means of preparing the theatre organ for the future. However, it is evident that the instrument itself is changing rapidly. It has been said before that if some manufacturers had continued to build theatre organs up to the present day, they might have made some intriguing innovations in design beyond those we have come to accept as standard features. (i.e. second touch, pizzicato touch, sostenuto, etc.). Some of the newer installations being made today are of highly modified instruments compared to those of only 10 or 15 years ago. And there are those of us who would rather not see these changes take place, preferring to keep the instruments as they were originally designed. That is certainly a laudable goal. But the changes taking place in the theatre organ are anything but detrimental. These new organs have computer-operated relay and combination action systems, radically new winding designs, and greatly expanded stoprail specifications that afford the organist an unparalleled amount of versatility and ease of control. The Wilcox residence organ, the Organ Stop Pizza organ in Mesa, and the Shea's Buffalo organ in New York are just a few shining examples of these new "old" instruments. Historically, theatre organs are only a flash in the pan compared to their liturgical counterparts and in reality are still infants in the music world. But they have undergone sweeping changes in a very short time. However, theatre organs aren't the only instruments that have undergone drastic changes in design. The piano is another case in point. For example, the instrument on which Beethoven performed is a 98-pound weakling compared to a present day concert grand. It has gone through an evolutionary process necessitated by the ever-changing music needs of the times. (I think Ludwig would have been fascinated with a modern day Bosendorfer!). This process of change is inevitable with all musical instruments and sometimes necessary for their survival in the music world.

I believe that the future of the instrument will depend on how well it adapts to its musical environment. The use of synths in conjunction with pipes can be very beneficial and may be the next step in a continuing evolution. It takes a great deal of patience and experimentation in order to achieve an acceptable balance between these instruments. But the time and effort spent on these endeavors are well worth the fantastic results that can be accomplished. The benefits will not only extend to the presentation of pop music, but many other forms as well. It is now possible to interpret symphonic literature more realistically and with dazzling results. Older standards from the 20s, 30s, and 40s can be given glittering new arrangements as well. All of these things can help make possible a broader range of appeal for audiences who will ultimately determine the fate of theatre organs. Several prominent artists have already made successful efforts in these areas. Exciting things are in store for future audiences as we continue to improve upon these ideas.

I hope that this essay will generate some additional comments and discussion between other readers and those of us who are making a living playing theatre organs. By doing so, we will help to provide a better climate for constructive change. My comments are strictly from a performer's point of view and scarcely begin to address the large number of issues governing the future of theatre organs. I merely hope that they may shed some light on how some of us, as performers, view our work.

In closing, I would remind everyone that if Robert Hope-Jones hadn't had the desire to break with tradition and begin to experiment with pipe organ design, the instrument which we so love might merely have been a random thought rather than a pleasant reality.

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