

Nero Got An Organ

And the Organ got Nero

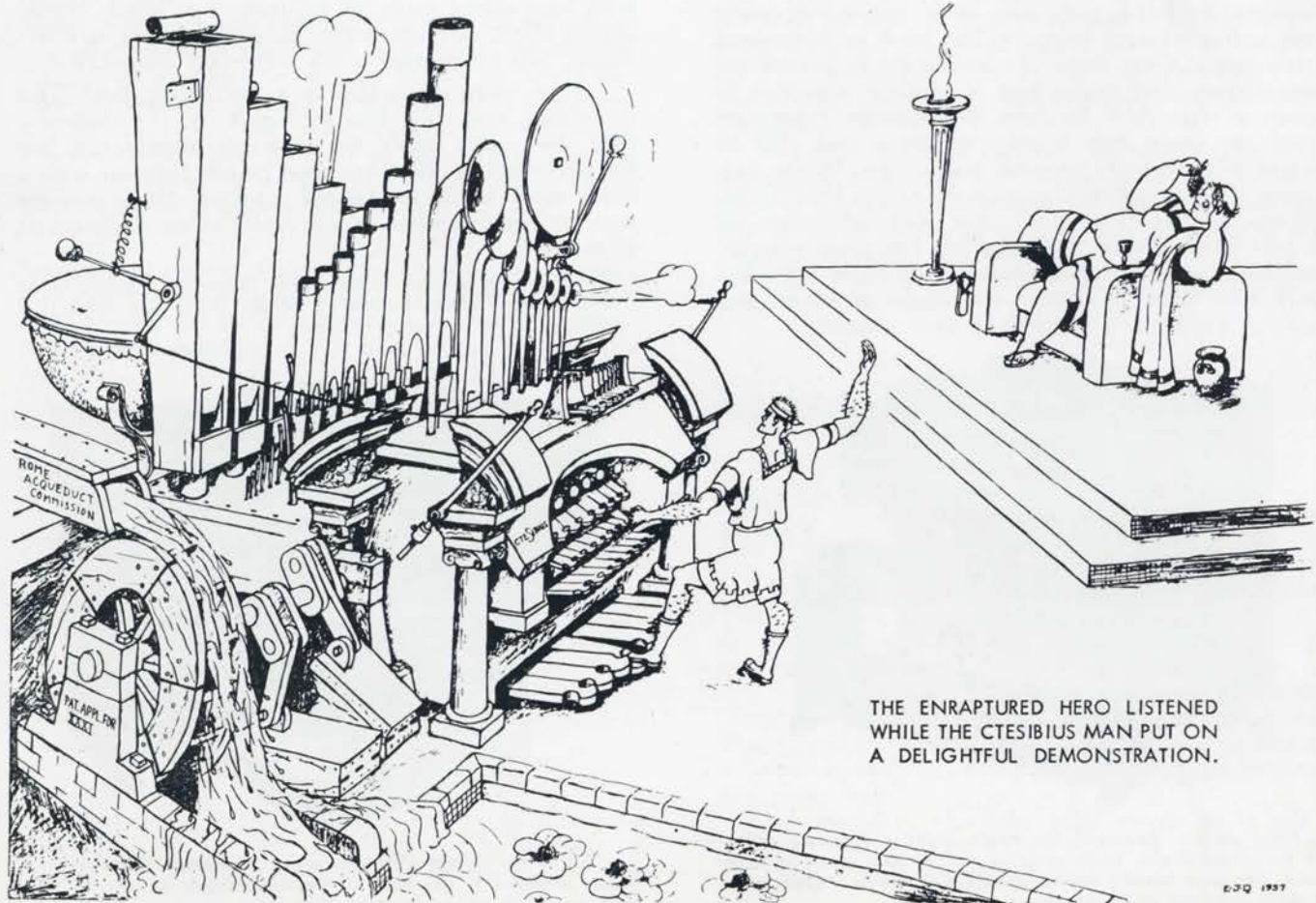
... by E. J. Quinby

WE who love the Organ as a natural adjunct of the theatre because of its romantic, dramatic, thrilling, spectacular, and generally entertaining properties, need not be on the defensive. We need not consider ourselves crackpots and fanatics devoted to only a temporary era in recent history when the organ enjoyed all too brief supremacy in the cinema palaces across the nation. True, this was a pleasant and most enjoyable chapter in the history of musical entertainment. But it was not the first of its kind and, God willing, it shall not be the last. If we take a proper perspective view of the available story of organ music, we find some encouraging facts. But we must back away from the record sufficiently to view it as far back as history itself was written.

Too many of us seem to accept the yarn that the organ we know today owes its existence to the Christian Church, and we adopt the stuffy opinion that diverting the organ into the theatrical or entertainment field constitutes rank corruption, even desecration. Although it is true that the organ enjoyed considerable development through its adoption by the early Christian Church, it is also true that the fundamental design principles of the pipe organ were used extensively before there

were any Christians — in fact, some of the early Christian Martyrs were evidently thrown to the lions in the Roman Circus to the lively, pagan blasts of sizable organs! Just imagine what dramatic climaxes the console artist of those days worked up in his organ arrangement for such a delightful Roman Spectacle. Those of us who have experienced thrills and chills watching Cecil B. DeMille's censored reproductions of these affairs on silent film with organ accompaniment in the rococo cinema palaces which seated an audience of only a few thousand, can well imagine what the original performances must have been like in a huge open-air arena seating half of the city's population. Other features on the same bill included chariot races, bull fights, and a few bouts between Gladiators in which mayhem was only the prelude to out-and-out murder. What an opportunity for the resourceful and imaginative organist!

Those of us who assume that organs in theatres constituted an innovation peculiar to the 20th century should bone up on history. A poet named Cornelius Severus in 22 B. C. went into raptures over an organ he heard in public entertainment, writing "... The confined air triumphant at last causes the struggling



THE ENRAPTURED HERO LISTENED WHILE THE CTESIBIUS MAN PUT ON A DELIGHTFUL DEMONSTRATION.

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mass of water to move; the trumpet gives forth its long blasts and the organ so rich in its varied strains under the master's skill, with its liquid sounds makes music for the vast theatre." Regardless of who did what to which, the results must have been pleasing. Also, we should note that whoever invented that hydraulic wind-supply back before Christ, failed to get a patent on it, so it became exploited as a novelty during the 19th Century right up until the advent of the powerful electric blowers of the 20th. Wealthy tycoons of the present century adopted the fashion of equipping their luxurious homes with pipe organs, but in this they were not at all original. The hydraulic organ became popular amongst the well-heeled aristocracy of ancient Rome, and organs that were indeed elaborate for that day and age were installed in the private residences of rich Romans. They were also as popular in the Circuses as they were in the Temples of those times. It is known that an actual organ with bellows for pumping wind, and a keyboard for the convenience of the organist existed as early as the reign of the second Ptolemy Eurgets some 250 years before Christ. Heron, a Greek of Alexandria, reported this development. Do you think barber shop harmonies were an innovation of the Gay Nineties? Look back, friends. A Barber of Alexandria, named Ctesibius, who lived between 284 and 246 years before Christ, was the organ builder and performer referred to by Heron. Some three hundred years later, an agent of his organization succeeded in signing up Nero as an early theatre organ fan.

During one of Nero's concert tours through Greece, he was disturbed by the news that Gallic legionnaires had revolted and were marching on Rome, led by a character named Vindex. As though this were not enough, later dispatches carried by runners revealed that in Dalmatia other legions joined up with this expedition under an experienced general named Galba. Things were not going well at home. How could a temperamental artist like Nero concentrate on concertizing in the face of such distractions? There was only one thing to do—call off the tour and tell the various box-offices to give the people back their money, or at least give them rain checks. So Nero hustled back to Rome in his fastest chariot, disregarding all speed laws en route. But when he got back to his palace, did he call a conference of his Generals? Heck no! He found a man waiting to see him about an organ. He represented the firm of Stesibius Hydraulus, Inc., of Cincinnati, and had brought with him in several ox-carts, the latest model organ with hydraulic drive like the one they had just installed in the huge Amphitheatre at the stupendous cost of a half million gold Dinarius. It was just what Nero had always wanted in his own home.

This organ did not need to be pumped by hand, neither did it require the services of a gang of husky bellows-treaders to jump back and forth from the top of one bellows to another. Those stumble-bums could never seem to stay sober long enough for the organist to complete a recital. They collided with each other and fell off the bellows, making the wind-supply and the music annoyingly unsteady. But here at last was an organ that could be connected to an external power supply. It employed a hydraulic pump that was energized by the Roman Aqueduct System. The City Commission would just add the cost onto Nero's monthly water bill. The enraptured Nero listened while the Ctesibius man put on a delightful demonstration. "I'll take it," announced Nero, reaching for his checkbook, "how much?"

"We'll make you a special price on this here demonstration sample as is, where is, — but we gotta have

payment in Greek Dinarius, on account of we found your Roman Dinarius were only gold-plated. Take it for MMMIC."

"M-m-m, I see" said Nero. "That's mucho dinarius. However, it's a deal." Whereupon he called in a few hundred friends and ordered up a banquet with all the usual trimmings including wine, women and song, to be enjoyed to organ accompaniment. This would provide a new twist to relieve the dull monotony of entertaining at the Palace. The marble walls echoed merrymaking far into the night, and although someone thought he heard the fire engines, he couldn't be certain through the din created by the organist with all the percussions and traps. There was a sort of red glow outside, which the guests assumed to be just the dawn breaking. But Nero wasn't telling nearly all he knew. Having overdrawn his bank account, he needed the fire insurance money and, anyhow, this would be a cheap way to get those unsightly slums cleared. "Go fetch my fiddle," he commanded one of the waiters, "I think I left it out in the Chariot. This organ guy is pretty good at harmonizing, and I have an idea for a new tune which I shall call THERE'LL BE A HOT TIME IN THE OLD TOWN TONIGHT."

Some 400 years later St. Jerome filed an enthusiastic report on a big "organ" in Jerusalem, mentioning its twelve mammoth bronze pipes. (Very likely these were the bottom octave in the bass division.) He tells us that the wind supply was contained in two elephant skins, that it was pumped by no less than fifteen blacksmiths' bellows, and could be heard clear up on top of the Mount of Olives a mile away. This makes it a close rival of Josh Stoddard's more recent steam Calliope (Greek for Sweet Voice), whose 1855 American patent claimed it would be ideal in a church steeple to call worshippers. Somehow it never achieved much popularity in that application, although it did become the accepted musical (?) instrument for circus parades, showboats, and excursion steamers. Many a youthful Calliopist survived his par-boiling experience to later devote his efforts to a cooler and more conventional organ — including this writer.

But let's get back to Nero, whom we left with his nocturnal revelers making whoopee to the noble noise of the Hydraulus. Eventually the nervous Committee on Revolutions caught his bloodshot eye. "Oh, yes," said Nero, "the revolution. How goes the battle?"

"Not so good, m'Lord," said the Chairman, "—in fact, the damned Dalmatians are even now at the Palace gates along with a lot of Galls."

"They've got a lot of Gall," quipped Nero, "just ignore them and maybe they'll go away."

But they didn't go away. Instead, they had the gall to crash the party. Nero jumped up and told the Organist to sound his middle A (440) on the Trumpet Stop so as to alert the Palace Guard, but it was too late. Seeing that the jig was up, Nero had his butler, a faithful stooge named Epaphroditus, go out in the garden and quickly dig a grave. As the party-crashers approached, Nero drew a dagger from the belt of his orchid tunic and slit his own throat, falling directly into the grave and thoughtfully saving the taxpayers the price of a formal execution and an elaborate funeral. About that time the Centurians arrived in response to several complaints from neighbors who claimed that Nero and his new-fangled dance-band were keeping everybody awake for miles around.

So, let this be a lesson to us organ fans. A box of whistles can get a man into a lot of trouble.

(With apologies to a very able historian named Dr. Alvin C. White in *The American Organist*, June, 1957)