

Letters To The Editor

Dear Editor:

There are two matters that appeared in the latest issue of THEATRE ORGAN, I feel should be commented upon: one concerning an incorrect caption and photograph; but the other touching on a serious problem that now alters the musical character of many Wurlitzer organs.

The first, and not very serious error, is the caption under the picture on page 19, purporting to show the amplifier racks and reproducing turntables of the "Vitaphone" equipment in the Capitol Theatre. This is not the reproducing equipment, but the studio recording setup. Note that there are no projectors connected with the turntables on the left of the photo, nor were the busy projectionists required to squint into microscopes as the particular sound playback record was in service. The microscope was employed only to verify the correct cutting of the wax during recording.

As a long time collector and historian of such equipment, I have had several sets of the first versions of the Western Electric "Vitaphone" theatre equipment, and I can say with some certainty that the system pictured was never installed in any theatre, but in the Warner Bros. studio recording suite.

The playback equipment was a combination optical film reproducer and a disc turntable, all mounted on a single massive cast iron base that also carried the projector head, upper film magazine and the arc lamp. The disc turntable was located at the lower rear of the base, the whole assembly being driven by one motor, insuring synchronism between film and disc sound.

Mercifully the sound on disc system was rapidly overhauled by sound on film and the clumsy turntables were abandoned.

The second item concerns the erroneous, wholesale scrapping of the original relays and switchstacks of many of the remaining theatre organs for digital replacements and the unmusical results heard on recent recordings upon the digitized instruments so butchered.

Brother Steve Levin correctly and rightly opened the door when he took issue with the hot-rodding of the Wurlitzer organ. This is an ongoing matter that should be not only addressed, but loudly condemned, because it destroys the original character of the remaining instruments.

One must take issue with the wholesale destruction of many Wurlitzer relays and the substitution of erratic and noticeably defective, scanning solid-state relay systems. Several recent CD releases of multi-

layered, half-speed recorded renderings (as in to tear apart, to sloppily dismantle) have illuminated the defective contractions to the educated ear.

Since one cannot play in the past and the present tense at the same time and with the same feeling and sensibility, these recordings take on the character of band organ rolls, or the old Aeolian Organ Guild Duo-Art residence organ recordings. The Guild was their nom de paper punch for totally hand assembled rolls.

Employed as I am in the aerospace-NASA world of spaceflight hardware, I am more than just familiar with digital data handling systems. The slow scanning rate-clock speed of the present crop of digital relay substitutes and their computer's need for finite processing time, results not in simultaneous note contact; but in arpeggio contact, particularly if the note content of the moment is increased. Large content general piston changes while holding chords with couplers cannot handle the data at a fast enough rate to make the alterations invisible to the ear.

It is surprising that parallel processing technology has seemingly bypassed the purveyors of the various systems, not to mention sufficient clock rate to do the data handling in minimum microseconds in place of the rates now used. I can easily hear the stuttering result, and I know many who also hear it. One cannot substitute slow serial data processing for parallel processing, the original system, and not notice the result.

If one does not possess the skill and knowledge to rebuild the Wurlitzer relay, then save up the pennies and have one of the honest professional firms do the work. The Wurlitzer relay is no more unreliable than the original console or the chests, or would they have all the original pneumatics ripped out and direct electric flap valves substituted?

And don't fall into the trap of regarding "modern space age electronics" as a superior substitute for the original pneumatic system. They are often anything but!! Wurlitzer's were not lax when their engineering staff designed the relays and switchstacks, they had the same goals of speed and reliability as they employed in their chest and console designs.

Also, what is your successor going to do twenty years from now when the original specification solid-state whatzis is no longer made? The Wurlitzer relay can be professionally rebuilt time after time and give superb service for the next hundred years. If you can't handle the job, don't

butcher the poor instrument to cover your inadequacies. Employ professional assistance.

It is particularly grating on the senses when alleged reviewers of the offered CDs are not able to tell the difference between half speed, multi-layer recordings and honest real-time recordings. The wooden clunking of the layered playing and the not exactly subtle rendering of more notes than any single artist can ever muster, double-manual, second-touch included, are not in the tradition of the theatre organ, not to mention good music in general. To call such renditions, "definitive" reveals the reviewer's amateur level of both knowledge and ability.

Give the remaining treasures a chance to survive as they were conceived and built, they deserve it.

Sincerely,
James D. Crank

Dear Editor:

Many cheers to Steve Levin in a recent issue of ATOS *International NEWS* for his opinions regarding keeping existing theatre organs intact. How well he stated the "hot rod mentality" of people taking a 2/3 and swelling it to a 4/40.

Many of my friends are involved in the restoration of antique cars/horseless carriages, etc. These folks generally strive to keep an historic car original. It is too bad the standards of theatre organ enthusiasts are not as high as historic car restorers. Of course, car groups also have their share of non-faithful restorers, but not to the extent our group seems to have.

I strongly fear some years down the road when it will be all but impossible to find an instrument as constructed by its builder. All too often we find a superb example of an instrument (say Wurlitzer) to which "just one more stop" has been added, often on a chest of other parentage just because it was available.

So pervasive is the "who cares what make it is" attitude, it is sometimes difficult to make well meaning people understand. If you have a Model T, you do not install a REO engine. I recently had quite a discussion with a person regarding a potentially historic example of an instrument. Little concern was (seemingly) set forth to make/keep the organ pure to its parentage. Essentially, the organ could be called a "Wurlitzer," but it could have Morton, Smith, Barton, or whatever. All good examples of theatre organ building may be exhibited by these makes, but not

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LETTERS cont.

all combined together to make yet another "hybridizer." It can be argued all day long (and then some) about the merits of one company's products over another's.

From the seeds set forth by Steve Levin and others of us, we'll see a change in attitude towards keeping remaining instruments intact. Steve admittedly sees the musical limitations set forth by his 3-3/5/15 style 35 Wurlitzer. The same can be said of some of the puny 2/3, 2/4 and 2/5 instruments. The lion's share of any builder's output was just these little 3 to 6-rank work horses. Do you realize nearly one-quarter of Wurlitzer's total output consisted of piano console (not photo-players!) theatre organs? Yet, when was the last time you saw one? The same can be said of Steve's style 35 . . . ever see a style 35?

The standards of musical quality of our concert-setting installations has risen to (generally) an all time high. Virtually all areas of the country now have fair to excellent examples of concert instruments. It seems time to have the individual enthusiast take upon himself the preservation of these instruments with an eye directed towards historical, mechanical, and future considerations of the theatre organ.

Most Sincerely,
Tom DeLay
Fresno, California

Dear Editor:

Firstly, my thanks for publishing a letter which asked for the whereabouts of a number of famous American organists. The response was great and the information from the writers made it possible for me to piece together some missing parts of an 'organ world jigsaw.' However, is there anyone who could confirm the information that the Nigerian organist Fele Sowande has passed away. When we used to correspond he was living in the Ohio area, but a writer has a dim recollection of reading an obituary some 18 months ago, possibly in the Canadian area. It is well documented that English theatre organists have a tradition of introducing themselves at the console with musical signature tunes that may represent the area where they come from: Reginald Dixon, Blackpool; "I Do Like To Be Beside the Seaside" or even a tune which incorporates their name (Bobby Pagan: "Pagan Love Song). The one chosen by Fele Sowande was rather subtle, bearing in mind his colour. It was "Deep Purple"!

On a separate matter, I would draw Reviewer Bob Shafter's attention to comments on "A Paramount Farewell" (March/April) which was compiled from tapes which I supplied to the Lancastrian Theatre

Organ Trust. Why on earth would recording engineers (in this case those from the BBC) wish to capture the 'muffled qualities' of a 3000 seater auditorium? If Mr. Shafter had only read my notes on the LP sleeve he would have seen that it clearly states that (a) the recording was mono (b) that the tapes were beginning to deteriorate and (c) by a process of deduction would note that the recording was 14 years old! Add to these the 'basic' quality of the tape available in the 70s and you have the correct answer to the sound quality. Even so there is no way that the sound could be described as muffled. The producer of the LP, the dubbing engineer and myself, spent a great many hours "doctoring" the tapes to re-create the sound of an instrument which we all knew intimately. Furthermore, the sleeve notes actually state the reason for the voice over narration (mine) as being a means to save the listener having to constantly refer to the record to find out which of the 9 organists is playing. As the spoken links are dubbed over applause it results in the concept of re-creating the atmosphere of the final concert by presenting a continuous programme of music including a reference to the actual intermission . . . which is where Side A ends. This is apparent to every other Reviewer, not to mention all the purchasers of the LP.

Yours Sincerely,
Alan Ashton
Manchester, England

Dear Editor:

The subject of this letter is of great concern to the parents of a talented young organist who lives in central Florida: lack of exposure to professional theatre organists currently on tour such as Bob Ralston or Paul Quarino. For that matter, exposure to a widely acclaimed teacher such as John Ferguson of Indianapolis is non-existent. For nearly twelve years, this organist has worked with a number of teachers both in classical and in theatre organ. From the beginning it was evident that she was becoming more mechanical with the primary focus on classical music. Becoming a good improvisationist requires a personal touch, something according to area artists that cannot be taught. How can the student develop these skills without professional guidance?

The introduction of a scholarship program sponsored by the ATOS indicates that we are on the right track if we hope to perpetuate theatre organ music through the education of students. Perhaps the scholarship program can be enhanced to provide students in areas like ours the opportunity to travel to cities where they can work with recognized teachers and

performers. As a result these young organists can become competitive artists of which our chapters can be proud. Keep up the good work!

John and Phyllis Nardy

Dear Editor:

We at the Connecticut Valley Theatre Organ Society were pleased to see Tom Hazleton's recording at the Thomaston Opera House, "Something To Remember You By" listed with "Bob's Best of 1990."

For those who have bought CD players and are building new theatre organ libraries, "That's Entertainment" by Chris Elliott and "Phoenix" by Walt Strony are excellent choices.

I would like to add one recording which may have just missed being reviewed in 1990 as it was first produced as a cassette. The CD appeared in 1990, however, and deserves special note. Jim Riggs' "Paramount on Parade" is one of the most refreshing collections of toe-tappers yet recorded, and unless you hate the music of the 1930s listening to this one is sure to brighten your day. While the recording upon repeated listenings may be a gnat's breath less than perfect, and the tremulant settings may be a bit fast for some listeners, I must confess to listening to this disc almost daily and my hat is off to Jim for producing such a delightful recording. The miking of the organ makes it sound even better than I recall it sounding in person, and the photos alone are worth the price of the disc.

And everyone truly interested in quality theatre organ MUST have a copy of Simon Gledhill's "California, Here I Come" recorded at the Castro Theatre and reviewed in the same March/April issue of THE-ATRE ORGAN.

Recordings, playing, and instruments of this calibre are setting new standards and are sure to propel the theatre organ as a musical instrument to new heights just as certainly as George Wright's HI-FI platters on the Vaughan organ and the Dot recordings on his studio organ set new standards in their day.

Sincerely,
Allen Miller

Dear Editor:

It is my wish, hope and prayer that whoever purchases the former Paramount Theatre studio organ will restore it to its original twenty-one ranks. This is an historically famous instrument, used for broadcasting, recording and sing-along movies by many of the greatest theatre organists. Its tone was beautiful, colorful and balanced. Many of us were hooked

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THEATRE ORGAN

President's Message cont.

wordy (so what else is new) and maybe a little more negative than I originally intended (so what else is new . . . again), but when it was discovered that, while a new president has been selected by the time you read this, there was no time for him or her to write this message, I was given one last opportunity to climb upon my now worn soapbox. Let me leave you with one final thought: The prognosis for the future of the society is good, but we need YOU to make it happen.

Until we meet again, I remain,
Sincerely,

John B. Ledwon

1991 National ATOS Election Results

Jack Moelmann	1385
Jim Riggs	1377
Paul Quarino	926
Ralph Beaudry	805
Alden Stockebrand	722
Edith Rawle	632
Laurel Haggart	510
Chuck Wiltsch	310
Hal Pritchard	294
Cyndae Koller	273
Jim Koller	195
Write ins	26
Total ballots received	2569
Disqualified	8
(more than 3 voted for)	
Total ballots counted	2561
Overseas ballots received	96
Submitted by Margret Ann Foy, May 21, 1991	

Letters cont.

on theatre organ by listening to Fred Feibel's "Organ Reveille" as we prepared for school and "Ann Leaf at the Organ" when we arrived home in the afternoon. Other organists I recall were Esther Leaf, Betty Gould, C.A.J. Parmentier and Fats Waller. The organ was so versatile that each organist made it sound different.

During WWII, Columbia Pictures made a series of sing-along movies featuring Lew White, Don Baker and Dick Leibert for armed forces theatres.

This organ should be preserved in its original condition for present day and future listeners.

Sincerely,
Al Hermanns,
Clearwater, Florida

New Scholarship Program of ATOS

Members of the Scholarship Committee are pleased to announce that the following students are the recipients of \$500 scholarships. These scholarships are to further their studies with professional theatre organ teachers.

All the scholarships were awarded in compliance with category "B" of the Scholarship Program. The committee was very impressed with the qualifications and resumes submitted.

SIMON PHILIP APPELYARD (16)
England

Teacher - Joyce Alldred

ZACHARY CUTFORTH (13)

Joliet, Illinois

Teacher - Lee Maloney

JELANI EDDINGTON (16)

Muncie, Indiana

Teacher - John Ferguson

SUSAN J. LEWANDOWSKI (13)

Madison Heights, Michigan

Teacher - Melissa Ambrose

ALICIA LUPA (16)

Citrus Heights, California

Teacher - Joyce Clifford

KEN MERLEY (15)

Troy, Michigan

Teacher - Steve Schlesing

ELENOR B. NARDY (16)

Alta Monte Springs, Florida

Teacher - Ken A. Stoope

Members of the Scholarship Committee are:

JOHN LEDWON
DAVID LOVE
CONNIE PURKEY
CHARLOTTE RIEGER
LOIS SEGUR
JINNY VANORE

Dorothy VanSteenkiste, Chairman
ATOS Scholarship Committee

Walt Strony Seminar

Registration for the
August 17 Seminar at the
Krughoff residence may be
sent to:

GIB PETZKE
419 West Oakdale Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60657
Phone: 312/248-5371

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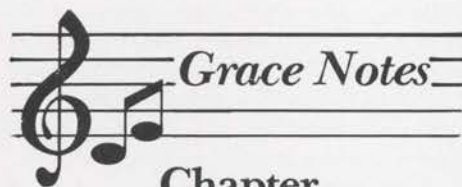
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Chapter Correspondents:

PLEASE CHECK THE QUALITY OF THE PHOTOS YOU SEND TO THE JOURNAL. MANY ARE TOO LIGHT (FLASH TOO CLOSE) AND SOME ARE OUT OF FOCUS. WE WOULD LIKE TO GIVE YOU THE BEST QUALITY POSSIBLE, BUT WE NEED YOUR HELP!

Editor