



Former Michigan Theatre Organ to Play Again

by Scott Smith

Lansing Theatre Organ, Inc., and the Grand Ledge Opera House Authority have signed an agreement to install the pipe organ formerly installed in downtown Lansing's finest movie palace into the historic Grand Ledge Opera House, built in 1884.

"It's the perfect marriage of two very unique restoration projects," says David Wade, president of the Grand Ledge Opera House Authority. "I can't begin to describe how excited we are to have the Barton Organ figure prominently in the Opera House." Likewise, LTO president Scott Smith echoes the feeling of elation with the prospect of a new home for the organ. "It's hard to believe that we've finally found the perfect home in our own backyard after ten years of searching, but indeed we have."

The Barton Organ began life in 1928 when it was installed as Opus 206 into downtown Lansing's then-Strand Theatre (later the Michigan) by the Bartola Musical Instruments Company of Oshkosh, Wisconsin, replacing a church-like organ installed at the time of the theatre's opening. Motion pictures with sound had begun to emerge in 1927, and it appeared to be the end of an era for these "Unit Orchestras," whose initial intent was to accompany silent films. The Michigan's Barton Organ was one of only a handful of these types of instruments ever in local theatres, and had a rather long life of prominence, beginning with silent films, solos and radio broadcasts. With changing times and

public tastes, the instrument became neglected, and fell into disuse. During the late 1960s, local volunteers banded together and restored the badly water-damaged instrument to its original glory by the early 1970s. From then until the theatre's closing on Labor Day 1980, the organ was featured in various concerts and silent film presentations.

When the theatre complex was sold by Butterfield Theatres to developers, the organ was donated to DaCapo, Inc., the organization that tried unsuccessfully for several years to purchase the building for use as a performing arts hall. At that time, the developers had no clear vision for the 1,500-seat auditorium, and DaCapo had hoped to lease the building, with the organ intact. Negotiations broke off, and by the fall of 1981, DaCapo was ordered to remove the instrument. DaCapo decided that it would be best to disband, and the organ was deeded over to Lansing Theatre Organ, Inc., formed earlier that year. LTO wasted no time in removing the organ to storage, and the search for a new permanent home began immediately.

Over the next several years, LTO left no stone unturned in attempting to locate a new, permanent home. Several locations in Lansing, Jackson and Grand Rapids were investigated and considered. Location, accessibility and acoustics were among the major criteria for site selection by LTO until finally settling on the Opera House. While the historic Grand Ledge location does not have the "big theatre" sound, it does offer the "studio installation" acoustics that organists crave, according to Smith. "This will afford a unique opportunity for audiences to experience the intimacy of an installation such as this. Plus, the responsiveness of an organ in close proximity to the organist makes for better music making. There is perhaps no musician so at the mercy of his instrument as is the organist. Here, we have the perfect situation."

Like the building in which it will be housed, the organ project can be considered "adaptive restoration." The three-manual console will be stored to its original red and gold finish, and the stoprails will be opened up to accommodate twice as many stop tablets as before. Internally, the console will have its old pneumatic stop action removed in exchange for a new, all-electric action, quieter and more responsive than before. The old console elevator from the theatre has been discarded in favor of a moveable platform, allowing it to be moved to various spots in the Opera House, as needed. Perhaps the most radical difference in the instrument will be the replacement of the old relay, with a modern computerized relay.

In 1989, LTO accepted donation of a second instrument, a Geneva Organ from the Deerpath Theatre in Lake Forest, Illinois, built in 1927. "It was clear to all of us that this instrument offered most of the additional voices and more deluxe percussions that we were seeking, not to mention its fine quality and completeness," says Smith. The combination of the best of the two organs will total twenty ranks of pipes, nearly twice as many as the Michigan's original set-up. "The instruments that are built today for the nineties and beyond need to have more variety of tonal color, to be more responsive and more reliable than ever before." Strong emphasis will also be placed on quality of tone, Smith assures, with such orchestral voices as flute, clarinet, french horn, trumpet, tuba and several sets of strings, in addition to the normal complement. Plus, the organ will boast several real percussions such as piano, chimes, xylophone, glockenspiel, three harps and a large battery of drums and effects.

The completed instrument will be housed in two chambers on the former balcony level of the Opera House at one end, overlooking the entire room. "The clarity of tone, as well as unimpeded sound egress ought to make for a mighty fine sound," Smith muses.

Use of the organ will be varied. LTO will produce three public events each year, including silent films and solo concerts, as well as a gala New Year's Eve celebration. The Opera House Authority will use the instrument for any number of functions taking place in the facility. In addition, the instrument will be utilized for teaching and recording purposes.

LTO has committed a one-year deadline for completion of the new instrument as set forth by the Opera House Authority. In addition to the restoration and installation of the organ, the non-profit, tax-exempt organization needs to organize a group of dedicated volunteers with a wide variety of skills, including cleaning, painting, carpentry and electrical, as well as raise \$40,000 to complete the project. Those interested parties wishing to donate to the project or volunteer their time may do so by writing to: Lansing Theatre Organ, Inc., P.O. Box 26154, Lansing, MI 48909.



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Melissa and Chris Eidson with two of Melissa's students, Susan Lewandowski (left) and Andrea Welch. Bo Hanley photo

Melissa Ambrose Marries

Saturday, June 1, Chris Eidson and Melissa Ambrose repeated their marriage vows in St. John's Episcopal Church in Royal Oak, Michigan.

Officiating at the ceremony were the newly retired father of the groom, Reverend Robert Eidson and the Reverend Richard Lindsey. Steve Schlesing was the pianist before the ceremony and Dennis Rivard was organist for the service. The ceremony was beautiful.

Following five bridesmaids, a maid of honor and a junior bridesmaid, Melissa was lovely in an off-shoulder delicate pink gown. Multi-colored flowers were used in the church and at the reception which was held at the Farina's Royal Reception Room in Berkley, Michigan.

Melissa was her usual "happy" personality, enjoying every minute of the whole day. Guests had a lot of fun at the reception.

Returning from a week of vacation, Melissa will be busy concertizing and distributing her first tape and compact disc, which were recorded at the Senate Theatre on their 4/34 Wurlitzer and produced by Pro-Arte. *Dorothy VanSteenkiste*

**FUN IN '91
NOVEMBER 1-3**

News From Allen Organ Company

Allen Organs are surfacing at some of the finest institutions of learning in the world. Venerable Edward Elliott Hall on the campus of Purdue University is observing its 50th anniversary this year and is doing so with the help of two new large Allens. The three-manual instruments, an MDS-85 and an MDS-Theatre III, are courtesy of the class of 1941, the first

class at the prestigious northwestern Indiana university to use the giant hall. This hall is one of the largest performing arts centers in the United States with seating for more than 6,000.

The Allen MDS-85 has already performed for sold-out audiences. With its more than 90 voices, the organ provided the perfect complement for use with orchestra, choir, and piano. The speakers are five stories above the concert stage in the proscenium arch, but even the softest stops are heard naturally. The console of the MDS-85 will eventually sit on an elevated platform off stage so that it can be easily transported.

More recently, Elliott Hall used its brand new Allen Theatre organ for its "University Sing" that required more of a popular music mode. Organist John Ferguson, a renowned organ instructor who trained four of the five American Theatre Organ Society winners in the years 1985-89, was, in his own words, "amazed" at the sounds of the organ that has a totally custom audio and speaker system with 16 channels. "I thought I was playing a real pipe organ," Ferguson exclaimed. "It was clean and clear without a trace of breaking that you hear on other large organs. It was shocking how good it is."

Elliott Hall will continue to have a variety of special events marking its landmark anniversary throughout the year.

Below: Allen organ at Purdue University.

