

CLOSING CHORD

James R. Breneman 1945 - 1991

"Suddenly, on July 18, 1991 . . ." are the lead words in the published obituary.

Too soon — for a man who had accomplished so much and surrounded us with beautiful music.

"Dead he is not, but departed — for the artist never dies."*



Jim studied Chemical Engineering at Drexel University, Philadelphia, and it was in the University's 19th Century auditorium that he was initiated into the world of organ music. He was impelled to join the crew which was restoring the Kimball in the Lansdowne Theatre. He continued, self-taught and undaunted by initial lack of skills, and eventually purchased the organ in the Philadelphia State Theatre on 52nd Street. Removing the components from chambers atop the third false proscenium, a reverse tone chute arrangement 80 feet above the auditorium floor, was the first of many challenges. The instrument was destined for the Brookline Theatre in Havertown, Pennsylvania, and, by the time it was fully functional, Breneman was thousands of miles away in Vietnam. After he returned, he moved the augmented instrument into the Colonial Theatre in Phoenixville, in 1975.

About to be forced out by the insolvent owners, Jim bought the theatre in 1979 and created The Chester County Center for the Performing Arts. The theatre became a concert venue for top concert theatre organists, vaudeville, art films and major Hollywood products. In 1984, Jim purchased the four-manual console originally installed in the St. Louis Theatre. The solid-English-Walnut, restored console graced the color-cover of the July 1989 THEATRE ORGAN. Excavating the new

and deeper orchestra pit, installing a lift for the console and getting the finished instrument down the theatre aisle was another physical challenge for Jim and his crew.

Breneman became a nationally recognized authority in the field of Kimball theatre organ construction and maintenance. Outwardly reserved, Breneman could be observed as paying strict attention when an organ technician or musician spoke. A perfectionist, he rejected all but first-class performance. He surrounded himself with experienced and prominent organ builders and musicians.

Breneman brought his technical know-how to complete the rehabilitation of the Civic Center Moller which had been an ATOS project since the 1970s. He tackled this immense job in December of 1987, and the organ played for Drexel's commencement on June 12, 1988. "It was particularly moving to hear 13,000 people sing the national anthem to the accompaniment of the organ," said Breneman. "I guarantee you, most of them sang better than they ever had before."

At the time of his death, Jim was part of the three-man crew rebuilding the world's largest organ, Wanamaker's, Philadelphia.

When Breneman sat at his own console, his love of the instrument could be evidenced by observing him.

"He is dead, the sweetest musician! / He has gone from us forever, / He has moved a littler nearer / to the master of all music."*

Irvin R. Glazer

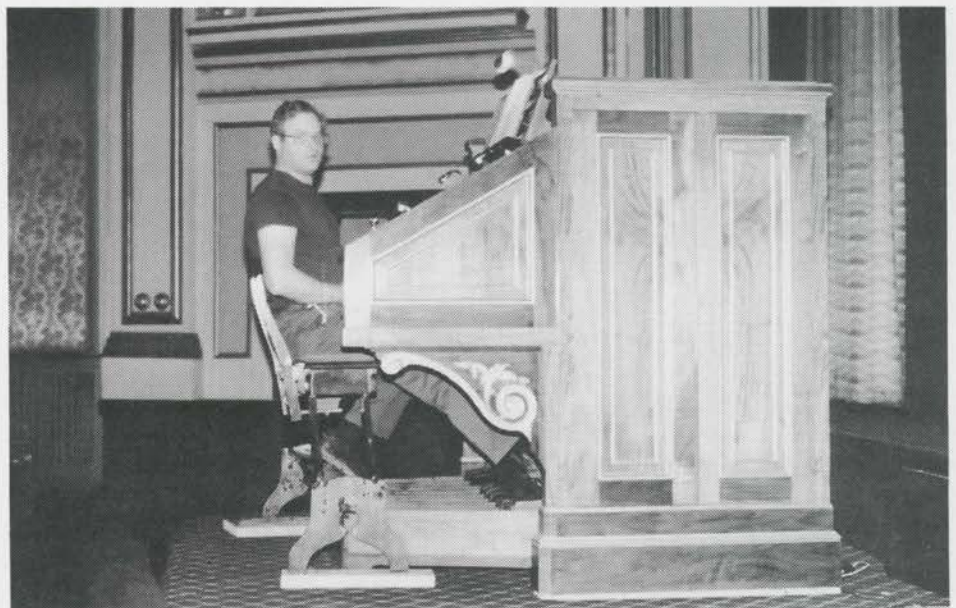
*Longfellow

On the Death of James Breneman

by Jonathan Ambrosino

Our June schedule took us to Philadelphia for a week, and happily coincided with a string of graduations in that city's Convention Hall. How we wished our school class had graduated in this building! High above the auditorium floor in palace-sized chambers, speaking backward through a tone chute, is one of the finest Moller organs ever built. It contains 88 entirely-enclosed ranks, four separate expressions, two consoles (concert and theatre), an Artiste Reproducing Player and tuning keyboards in every chamber. This is an organ which wastes no time and is eager to get on with things. Speaking entirely on ten-, fifteen- and twenty-inch pressure, it has an exceptional tonal virility and one of the most satisfying ensemble textures we've heard. Since the schools want a little Elgar with their diplomas and tassels, the concert console is unearthed every June, and from its keyboards, the organ serenades the students to their commencement.

The Moller was silent only a few years ago. But since a group of Philadelphia organmen began donating their time and individual talents, the organ has been steadily regaining its voice. Of these gentlemen, none devoted more energy or love than James Breneman. And as we entered the Auditorium doors that Tuesday morning, and walked from vestibule to stage, it was Jim we saw. He was leaning against



Jim Breneman at the console of his Kimball in the Colonial Theatre.

Irvin Glazer photo

THEATRE ORGAN

the console, looking much like a father chaperoning a teenage daughter on a first date. As each school's organist settled onto the bench Jim pointed out what to use, how the expression arranger operated, and how to work around this or that tiny problem. He greeted us with a warm handshake and his usual lively lip. We spent that morning with Jim, and the next few as well, listening to the instrument, exchanging organ banter and pulling each other's legs.

Jim's tall, burly figure was complemented by a strong Philadelphia accent, an infectious smile and a refreshingly down-to-earth approach. He had an open affair with the Impossible, and flaunted the relationship. *Who says* I can't rebuild a reservoir the size of a limousine? he seemed to say. *Who says* I can't fit this eight-inch duct in this six-inch hole? *Who says* I can't make the expression work perfectly? Jim could and did, and grinned like a horseshoe console afterward. He threw his life into such challenges, and persevered with success.

Although principally a theatre organ aficionado, Jim had a blanket philosophy of organbuilding: high pressure, high pressure and more high pressure. In fact, sufficient wind was a cornerstone of organ building that Jim spared no pains to emphasize. While inspecting the Kimball organ in the Worcester Memorial Auditorium, he expressed genuine shock that portions of the Great were only on six-inch wind. "Awfully low," he muttered, making his way up the ladder to another division. Further discussion revealed that Yale's Woolsey Hall Skinner was "moderately winded" (with its median pressure of ten inches), most modern organs were "laughably wind-starved," but, we are happy to report, the Chicago Stadium Barton (with pressures up to thirty-five inches) was a "real organ."

He held a general contempt for modern organbuilding, which he countered by working on fine Symphonic and theatre organs. In addition to all its other projects, the Breneman crew accomplished several restorative tasks this year on the enormous organ at the Wanamaker Store. Among Jim's many prides and joys was the theatre he owned in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. In it, he installed a marvelous Kimball unit orchestra of over 32 ranks. Having provided the setting, he then offered a forum by establishing an annual artists' series. Through this venue, Jim brought many of the country's finest theatre organists to Philadelphia audiences.

It was only natural that Jim's theatre should house a Kimball, for Jim placed Kimball above all other builders. Indeed, no other firm had ever really gotten down to serious business, in Jim's eyes. Certain-

ly one of his favorite instruments was the 1928 Kimball in the Minneapolis Auditorium. A strong appeal of the Philadelphia Convention Hall Moller for Jim was that it was to have been a Kimball contract, patterned after the Minneapolis job. Moller conscientiously followed many of Kimball's scaling guides, and the overall effect is indeed rather reminiscent of Kimball at their best.

Considering all of the above facets of Jim's life, it was surely providential that our last day with Jim included a tour of the Wanamaker String Organ. This one division is a veritable convention of Breneman ideals. Here — within an indescribably magnificent instrument, surrounded by the world's finest string ranks, with more Kimball pipework in one room than anywhere else, and all voiced on what he would have deemed "sufficient" wind pressure — Jim was fairly close to Paradise, and only three stories up at that. Those few hours revealed to us the essence of Jim's character. He guided us with the mature pride of a steward. Not for him was the attitude that works of art belong to one age or person. He saw his duty as aiding the re-birth of forgotten glory, putting it forth in its best light, and sharing it with others. If he worked on the Wanamaker instrument, it was to benefit one of the world's most unusual, if unwieldy, instruments; if he gave his time at the Convention Hall, it was because a great organ should be heard again; if he provided a new effect at Phoenixville, it was so Philadelphians could hear theatre organ art at its most profound.

Such was a man who gave fully of himself to the organ, its world and its mission. Jim graced life with purpose and humor.

Above all, he paved a highway of good deeds and charged no tolls. Although we miss him deeply, we know he has gone to where the highest pressures prevail, and, with any luck, the reservoirs are probably about to burst. For James Breneman, *that* would be Heaven indeed.

John H. Napier

John Napier passed away on May 22 following a massive heart attack. He was 55. A member of ATOS, Delaware Valley, Dickinson, Garden State, and treasurer of the newly organized South Jersey Chapter, he had a Conn organ installed in his home.

Jack, as we knew him, was a young man filled with love for the theatre organ. He started his short career taking piano lessons from my piano teacher. He soon requested the use of the Moller organ at Calvin Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. The Board of Sessions granted this permission in the early 1950s and Jack came to love the Calvin organ and to make it do things no one else could do. He became Calvin's organist for a few years, left, and then returned to that position in recent years. He also served as Choir Director and Deacon for Calvin Presbyterian.

Whenever he was not working, Jack spent his time at his Conn or at the Moller in his church. He will be sadly missed by those who knew and loved him. He was able to take an organ and truly make it sing!

We miss you, Jack, but we know God needed you to play the Heavenly Organ for the Heavenly Choir.

Dolores A. Hendrikse

■■■
*Light quirks of music, broken and uneven,
make the soul dance upon a jig to heaven.*

ALEXANDER POPE, *Moral Essays*, 1733



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