

Letters To The Editor

(Because of the number and length of the letters responding to those about the preservation and restoration of theatre pipe organs, we have found it necessary to print only part of each letter. A fuller discussion of this subject will be welcome at a later date. ED.)

Dear Editor:

As today's technology changes, people look toward traditional values and familiar things to maintain a sense of constancy and stability in their lives. I have noticed trends toward restoring antiques such as old cars, furniture, and even houses, with special attention paid to the craftsmanship of the item at the time it was built. This trend applies to the theatre organ, although few can afford to purchase and house a complete instrument.

The letter by James Crank was most revealing regarding the replacement of original switching relays with solid-state units. I've heard complaints from the "High-end Audio Crowd" about the graininess of CDs, and perhaps those Golden Ears are right. However, given the advances in digital parallel processing, we should have solid-state switching units soon that perform better than the original in all respects. To keep all of the original parts in good working order is a decision to be made by the owner, and if he is determined to remain authentic it will require a sacrifice of time to maintain those parts. Yet, half the fun is performing the variety of tasks which keep the instrument operating at its peak.

Which raises another question: How do you learn the art and science of restoration? If there was a book published with this information, I would buy one today. How about more articles on the technical end of installations? Let's get those of you who know these things to get the forum started, and through it continue to attract the younger folks we need to preserve the Mighty Wurlitzer for generations to come.

Randy A. Bergum
Fullerton, California

Dear Editor:

In regard to the "Hot-rodding" of theatre pipe organs, when it is done with good taste and for tonal beauty, it is not wrong. We are under no gun in this country to go only as far as the past did with what was created, nor are we under a mandate to do everything only according to tradition. Hope-Jones and Wurlitzer certainly did not do things according to tradition; if they had, the theatre organ might never have been created.

Bob Legon
Walden, Massachusetts

Dear Editor:

A recent letter by James Crank argues for keeping original electro-pneumatic relays, restoring when necessary, rather than replacing them with an electronic product. My experience maintaining a 13-rank Barton in Ann Arbor has led me to offer some thoughts on the controversy.

This instrument is in a busy theatre which presents both movies and stage shows as well as concerts and is often unavailable for routine maintenance. If one wishes to have the organ 100% operational at all times, as I do, it is imperative that one spend time almost weekly tracing dead notes, dirty magnets, etc. I estimate that most of the malfunctions I deal with involve either the relay room or the console, and this makes the thought of an electronic relay — and console action — very attractive. However, my experience with a small electronic relay which has been added to this organ is that it, too, has its peculiarities, and when something goes wrong the theatre has to hire a professional. Even now we have a unique problem that happens once in awhile, quite unpredictably, a rapid arpeggio occurs in all the stops the new relay controls (not beneficial to the music being played). My advice to those contemplating an electronic relay is to be certain to get a warranty or guarantee.

Does this mean that Mr. Crank is correct in advocating retaining the original relay, rebuilding as necessary? Not necessarily, in my opinion. Rebuilt or not, it is still too complex to be reliable, takes up too much space, is noisy and requires a supply of wind which inevitably will carry dirt into places that will cause the mechanism to malfunction. I would ask Mr. Crank the same question he asked about electronic relays: What is your successor going to do twenty years from now? How many "professionals" will be around in 2011 to work on those creaky old relays built in the 1920s?

Ben Levy
Ann Arbor, Michigan

Dear Editor:

We have seen in recent issues some fairly strong opinions about what constitutes theatre organ preservation. Our Bylaws clearly state "... organized for the purpose of preserving the tradition of the theatre organ ..." I would like to challenge ATOS to organize a committee of historians, organists AND organbuilders to define what should be considered an example of historic preservation as it applies to the theatre organ. This would be governed in much the same manner as our present

Hall of Fame.

An initial list of qualified theatre organs could be made, and at each convention another example could be added to the list. We have been losing too many instruments to "parts supplies." Though the Historical Significant Award would not/could not carry any legal weight, it would at least exemplify a recognition of history toward a given instrument by the American Theatre Organ Society.

Some criteria might be:

1. That the organ is intact
 - A. still in original location
 - B. in storage
 - C. relocated to another site
2. If altered, it must be limited to
 - A. new unification
 - B. relay modernization
3. Reasons for historical significance
 - A. artist who played it
 - B. radio broadcasts
 - C. only intact instrument by a given manufacturer
 - a. still in theatre
 - b. moved to subsequent location
 - D. only form of a given style of instrument
 - a. why unique?

This should not be confused with the difficult-to-administer "Technical Standards Award" considered many years ago. Presumably, if an instrument is intact, it had a reasonably good builder to begin with. Subsequent re-installations could only apply in this case as long as the instrument were intact. Hopefully, these would be made according to quality and high craftsmanship. In any case, whatever criteria are established, the goal would be to keep remaining theatre organs intact for future generations.

Tom DeLay
Fresno, California

Dear Editor:

A member of London Chapter, also Chairman and Team Leader of the Bristol Theatre Organ Preservation Group, formed exclusively for the restoration and promotion of the 3c/6 Compton (1935) Organ in the Odeon Theatre, Weston-Super-Mare, Avon, England, I refer to a report in your International NEWS, December 1990 under the heading "Organ stays but cannot be played."

It is my great pleasure to inform you that the fourth screen conversion of the main auditorium has been completed, and is a model of a pleasing and satisfactory division and a potential 'lifesaver' for this Cinema and its organ.

(continued ...)

THEATRE ORGAN



1935 Compton in Weston-Super-Mare

A Cinema Open Day on July 25 in which "Screen 4" was completely devoted to demonstration, viewing and open console sessions all day proved to the satisfaction of all, professional organists included, that our much loved Compton has at last revealed its true worth and beauty, for in the process of division the roof void has been completely sealed off from the organ sound ducting through which it speaks from the stage roof exterior chambers via the proscenium arch louvres. This has revealed the welcome fact that it was previously, for 55 years, losing much of its power and articulation by generation of confusing standing waves in the whole of the theatre roof area above the auditorium ceiling.

The new organ studio (my description) provides approximately 260 seats in comfort, which we confidently expect to fill. It is my conviction that the owners, Odeon Theatres, part of the Rank Organisation and their architects have done a fine job at Weston, with which we as organ sponsors, in company with the theatre management are justly delighted and proud, as also should be the local Woodspring Council Planners, whose interest was in the preservation of the original character of the building AND OF THE ORGAN both being "listed" as being of historic and architectural importance to British heritage.

On August 4 we held our first concert in the new auditorium to a delighted almost full house, entertained by our much loved and respected local resident and good friend, George Blackmore, and after a further brief interval of more re-leathering, we will be back at it again, in full song.

Very best wishes to all our American friends. Incidentally, your "For Sale" ads make me GREEN with envy.

Most sincerely,
Frank Pridham

Dear Editor:

I am writing to you regarding a project that the Organ Historical Society has undertaken, and I am wondering if perhaps the ATOS membership would be willing to help.

In past years, the OHS has assembled

and maintained a list of all the old and new tracker-action organs in the U.S. I have recently been working on up-dating that list for Sections 5 and 6 which includes: Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Kansas, Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. I have done this by paging through copies of *The Tracker* from 1982 to present and *The American Organist* from 1963 to present. I have made additions, deletions, and corrections, and have expanded the list for these two sections by about 49%.

Recently, the OHS made plans to try to assemble another list. We are attempting to assemble a list of ALL extant organs in the U.S. which were built (or at least whose origins were built) in or before 1940. I am writing to ask if perhaps it would be possible to have printed in THEATRE ORGAN an explanation of this undertaking and an appeal to the ATOS membership to send information about extant theatre organs in theatres, schools, etc. around the country. It would be a great help to the OHS, and would be a nice way for the two pipe organ-related societies to participate in a common project.



If there is any information to be shared, and if the ATOS is interested in helping with the current OHS cataloguing project, the following information would be desired for each instrument:

1. Name of the original builder.
2. Opus number and year installed.
3. Original installation location
4. Complete specifications to include:
 - a) Pitch level and stop names of all stops, by division;
 - b) All inter- and intra-mural couplers;
 - c) finger pistons;
 - d) toe studs;
 - e) pedal movements;
 - f) pipe distribution analysis;
 - g) subsequent history.

I sincerely hope that the ATOS will be able to help.

With many thanks,
James R. Stettner
8309 5th Avenue N.E., Apt. 102
Seattle, WA 98115

Dear Editor:

We have made tremendous strides in the production of sound which resembles that produced by pipes, percussions, and traps belonging to theatre organs. We have seen electronics improve the control of existing pipe installations to make them respond to our every nuance. But we have not seen the duplication of theatre organs

like those which once graced the aprons of the pleasure palaces of the twenties and thirties.

The major manufacturers, Allen and Rodgers, have not given us instruments with sub- and super-couplers, reiterating percussions, double touch on great and accompaniment, and perhaps, pedals; sostenuto, and pizzicato. Is such too difficult to create?

It is commendable that Allen brought out its super theatre model at the recent ATOS Convention. It is even remarkable that it had second touch available on the accompaniment. But, given its limited keying system, it remains a "straight" organ. One wonders why, with its resources, Allen could not have had at least a published list of stops and accessories for its creation. It would have been something to whet the appetite.

Rodgers bordered upon insult by presenting a church organ. Yes, many of us went to the display, but only to hear Hazleton's artistry. Once the company produced a decent theatre model with most of the sounds and accessories previously mentioned. But, what happened? Can't the company produce a theatre organ again?

There was a Digital Pipes display, but no one was ever there to demonstrate it or to answer specialized questions. There are probably other small manufacturers available, but without publicity, who knows about them?

I have heard and read the cries for instruments and teachers so that the culture of the theatre organ might not slip into oblivion. There is a great interest out there. After all, the number at the recent convention was as great as the numbers at many of the AGO National Conventions in recent years. And those who were present probably represent more interested parties (and potential sales) back home.

Come on, Manufacturers, there's gold in them thar' hills!

A. Charles Roger
Schwenksville, Pennsylvania

Dear Editor:

I was one of the 904 ATOSers who attended the recent "Ninety-One-Derful" in San Francisco. The NorCal Chapter is to be commended for putting together a first-rate lineup of outstanding instruments and artists. Bravo!

Having also attended the 1990 Indianapolis convention and the 1989 Phoenix regional, it was quite natural for me and a number of others I spoke with to make some comparisons. I respectfully offer the following two suggestions for the consideration of future regional and national ATOS convention planners. (continued...)

Letters To The Editor (cont.)

1. In addition to hearing the world's leading theatre organists perform in concert, ATOS conventions (ideally) also provide members a wonderful opportunity to renew friendships and socialize. Although the San Francisco, St. Francis Hotel undoubtedly ranks as one of our nation's finest, it was not a good choice for an ATOS convention. The open air, "atrium" style hotels (i.e. Hyatt Regency) used in Indianapolis and Phoenix made it easy to spot one's friends dining, drinking or strolling, thus giving rise to many enjoyable impromptu and informal social gatherings. Such gatherings were a rarity at the St. Francis, partly due to its traditional hotel layout, with restaurants and bars hidden away in concealed nooks and crannies, but also because the hotel's bars and restaurants were ridiculously expensive. Cocktails were \$6.25(!) in the lobby bar and food prices were equally high. As a result, most of our members left the hotel to eat and drink. At the Phoenix and Indianapolis ATOS conventions, everyone pretty much stayed in the hotel for meals and drinks, thus maximizing the possibilities for socializing. We should stick to reasonably priced, atrium-style hotels for our conventions.

2. The San Francisco convention's schedule of events was a bit too full. If one attended all of a typical day's concerts, immediately went to bed upon returning to the hotel in the evening, and allowed just enough time in the morning to shower, dress and grab a quick bite of breakfast before boarding BART or a bus to attend the morning's first concert, it was impossible to get much more than six hours sleep. As a result, it was common to see some of our members dozing at concerts. Of course, some ATOSers solved the exhaustion problem by sleeping in, thus missing one or more of the wonderful early morning concerts that artists and convention officials alike had worked so hard to prepare.

I would like to suggest that future convention concert schedules be organized in such a way that eight hours sleep each night is possible, perhaps even allowing enough time for one to have a brief nightcap with friends. This was the case in both Indianapolis and Phoenix.

Please don't misunderstand my comments. I had a wonderful time at the San Francisco convention, and I'm certain that everyone else did, too. Truly it was a magnificently organized event and a wonderful success. However, if a few changes or a bit of refinement can enhance our enjoyment of these gatherings even more, why not?

Richard Rogers, St. Louis, Missouri

Holiday Greetings

from your ATOS Officers, Board and Staff!

JIM RIGGS
JOHN LEDWON
BOB MARKWORTH
DOUG FISK
TIMOTHY NEEDLER
PAUL QUARINO
RUSS HAMNETT
BYRON MELCHER
GARY JONES
JACK MOELMANN
TOM B'HEND
VERNON P. BICKEL
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