

theatre organ

JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF THEATRE ORGAN ENTHUSIASTS

THE EDITOR NOTES . . .

Just What Is a Theatre Organ?

DOES A tibia make an organ a theatre organ? How often have we heard such a question answered by someone seriously trying to define what constitutes a theatre organ? Then, when one stops a moment and tries to formulate something that will adequately tell the answer, he is hard pressed to come up with a clear statement. When confronted with certain evidence, it is sometimes easier for one to say with conviction what a theatre organ 'isn't'.

There are occasions when one listens to a Wurlitzer 235, for example and without knowing what he is hearing, may imagine that he is listening to some straight organ in a concert hall. On the other hand, it would be unusual, indeed, for one to listen to a traditional concert organ and think even for a moment that he was hearing a theatre organ. Each of us is aware of this difference, and each has his own private stock of information or memories that guide him without his having to put it into words.

Whenever there is a gathering of a local chapter of ATOE, or when one hears some outstanding organist put a theatre organ through its paces, one is likely to encounter someone whose experiences have not brought him into the presence of this musical combination before. He, then, sincerely asks the question: "What is it that makes this a theatre organ?"

Even if temporarily elusive, one may say that like other properties of the theatre, the organ is identified by its dramatic ability. So we have side-stepped for a moment and avoided a sharp definition. We have opened up the way for an organ to have theatrical qualities in different amounts. Those who can remember the cue sheet, the various devices to depict and portray moods, the systems of music which were advocated, and the other accessories of the silent movies, will know that agreement was never complete as to how to set the mood for a scene. Like the waters of a lake, the mood can run from the most ethereal calm to a violent death-dealing storm. All the emotional content that a human mind is able to embrace can be set to music. But, here

again, it takes one who has at his disposal, not only the imagination, but the musical instrument on which to express these emotions.

The good theatre organist knows how to use all the means available in order to reach his listeners. He will no more produce identical pictures in the minds of his listeners than does any other common experience. But he will set the mood and background -- this will be quite uniform.

Just as a symphony orchestra has its various sections that are predominantly musical specialties, so does a theatre organ. There is little chance to mistake the sound of an oboe, a cymbal, or a trumpet. But to accurately distinguish which string is playing in a middle register may not be so easy -- nor important.

So, when a scene is of no particularly dramatic consequence, it does not need, nor can it tolerate, a dramatic musical background. But as tempo and mood become agitated, the dramatic situation is seen to build up musically in keeping with the action. How this is done is a matter of great personal variation, but musical violence is no less a fact than is physical; nor is its impact any less appreciable.

Because of its unique requirement to span the wide range of human emotions, the theatre organ attracted to itself the wide ranges of musical tones and qualities that distinguish it. Reeds that would be out of place anywhere else are at home in the theatre. But when the ultimate thrill of a lifetime is counted, it is more likely to be an experience that harbors love as its chief ingredient. Close to the feeling of love are the appreciation of beauty, good will toward others, the perfumed atmosphere of a garden, and the quiet stillness of night. And musically, no sound has ever emerged that can produce an accompaniment to these emotional delights as well as our beloved tibia. True, it is used in many places in combinations that are not always in these moods, but by itself, the sound of a tibia is good -- it has no inherent

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