

The Swingin' Austin ...

HARTFORD'S "MIGHTY" THEATRE ORGAN



Interior of Allyn Theatre, Hartford, Connecticut.

THE 3M 12R AUSTIN OPUS 1512, INSTALLED IN 1927 IN HARTFORD'S ALLYN THEATRE

by Allen R. Miller and
Joseph M. Tobin, Jr.

In 1927, the Allyn family of Hartford built the one-million dollar Allyn Theatre. Designed by Eugene DeRosa of New York, it was a 2,200 seat house featuring ankle-deep carpeting, plush red and gold draperies, a huge crystal chandelier weighing over a ton, and a garden in the orchestra pit containing live plants and three real fountains. There is a clear view of the 44' by 28' stage from every seat in the house, and the theatre is acoustically perfect. A person on stage speaking normally can be heard clearly anywhere in the house. There are no "dead spots".

Being friendly with the Austin family, the Allyn's ordered an organ which would be built to meet the needs of the theatre. The largest theatre organ built by Austin Organs of Hartford, Connecticut, at that time, the instrument was one of about 100 built by that company, nine of which were unit organs, the others 'straight' organs. The organ, installed in two chambers high on the sides of the theatre, speaks through three tone projectors (Accompaniment, Swell, and Percussion), which focus the sound into the theatre through grilles which were disguised as loges. The theatre itself has a reverberation time of three seconds.

The left chamber, on 10" wind, contains: Open Diapason (85 pipes), extended from 2' to 16'; a large scale Gross Flute which sounds like a Tibia Plena (73 pipes); Gemshorn (73 pipes); Viole d'Amour (73 pipes) voiced so softly that it cannot be heard with the swell shades closed; Clarinet (73 pipes); Harmonic Tuba

(85 pipes). Also on this side are the non-tonal and accompaniment percussions: Harp (61 notes), Chimes, Tom-Tom, Snare Drum, Chinese Block, Tambourine, Bass Drum, Cymbal, Triangle, two Birds which automatically chirp back and forth at each other, Auto horn (old bus type), Telephone (a real telephone), and Steamboat Whistle.

The right chamber, on 12" wind, is somewhat smaller than the left chamber, and contains the Tibia Clausa (85 pipes); Viole d'Orchestre (85 pipes), extended to 16'; Celeste (61 pipes); Concert Flute (85 pipes); Vox Humana (61 pipes), Hope-Jones type enclosed in box, and Orchestral Oboe (61 pipes), with brass resonators. There is also a Deagan Xylophone holding the place of honor just behind the swell shades.

The organ is powered by a 7½ hp Spencer Orgoblo with a TWO phase motor.

To hear this instrument is definitely an experience! It is lush theatre sound at its best, very much like the sound of the Richmond Mosque organ.

It is unfortunate that all the care and precision that went into the pipework and layout of the organ was forgotten when the console was built. There was mass confusion in the stop tablets, some of the Accompaniment stops having been placed among the Great stops. In addition, the Great pistons controlled some of the Accompaniment stops. If this was not enough to anger an organist, the console shell was.

The console supplied by Austin

was a conventional church model which proved satisfactory until 1929 when Paramount took over the theatre. Paramount officials spent weeks trying to make the console look like a WurliTzer. Finally, the present console, a grotesque "horseshoe" affair, was constructed as a shell to fit around the old console. Oddly enough, even though the console looks like a candy box from up close, some sort of optical illusion seems to make the bolster appear curved when seen from the balcony.

On the other hand, the Austin console does have its advantages. It is completely silent (no air hiss or pneumatic "bump"), and the relays, which are in the console, are almost foolproof and very easy to adjust.

It will be noted from the specifications that the Accompaniment manual operates only those pipes in the left chamber, while the Solo manual operates only the pipes in the right chamber. As is usual theatre organ practice, everything can be found on the Great manual.

Since each chamber contains two each of Flute, String, and Reed stops, there is really no need for complete unification of these manuals. In fact, this system is very appropriate for Stereo recording.

This is the only theatre organ in Hartford which never stopped playing, and it probably has one of the most colorful histories. The theatre was officially opened Sunday, April 18, 1927, as a vaudeville house. The program opened with an organ interlude by Norman Strickey, the first organist at the theatre. Mr. Strickey, of Danbury, Connecticut, had just finished a tour of Publix Deluxe Theatres throughout the United States, and for several years had been solo-

theatre organ

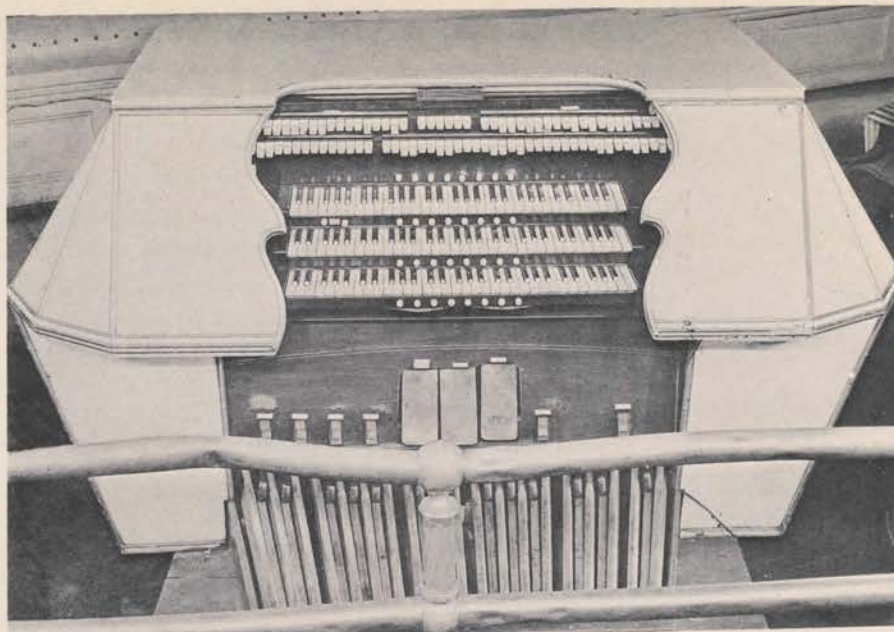
ist at the Allyn Theatre in Cleveland, Ohio.

Following the organ interlude, the orchestra under the direction of Louis Holtman played "The Star Spangled Banner". Guest speaker for the evening was none other than Dr. Lee DeForest, inventor of the vacuum tube and the Phonofilm. After due explanation, an example of the Phonofilm, the first talking picture, was shown. Vaudeville then followed the picture. This was probably one of the only theatres which showed "Talkies" before silent movies.

The theatre's policy for the next three years was "The Best in Vaudeville". At that time, the movie was only about 15 minutes long, and the organ was used to accompany the picture and for the "community sing" feature. Admission was about forty cents at that time, and included coffee, tea, and cookies, which were served on the mezzanine.

In 1929, Paramount saw the possibilities in the theatre and its patrons, and tried to buy it from the Allyn family. The Allyn's would not budge. Finally, when Paramount threatened to erect a bigger and better theatre across the street, the Allyn's gave in. It was at this time that several changes were made in the organ to make it as much like a Wurlitzer as possible. Larger tremolos were installed, the wind pressure was raised, and the pipes were revoiced. Along with the new management, came a new organist.

Collin Driggs, a 19-year-old just out of school, took over the position at the console. Collin studied under



Console - Allyn Theatre - Hartford, Connecticut

Lew White at the Roxy, and knew most of the tricks, such as "The Phantom Organ", with a separate console backstage, singers and a violinist hidden in the chambers. These, together with Collin's personality and showmanship, made the organ a feature. It was not long before Collin Driggs was playing the organ twice a week for WTIC radio, and it was through this medium that the organ won most of its fame.

The organ was on the climb, and survived the musician's union's death-blow which would not allow a theatre organ to be played without a full orchestra accompanying it. While the other theatres in the city abandoned their organs, the Allyn theatre struggled on, still using the organ with a small band. Then, in 1938, a flood hit Hartford, and the deluge of rain caved in the roof of the theatre

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Specifications of Allyn Theatre 3m, 12r Mighty Austin Organ

PEDAL:

32 Resultant
16 Open Diapason
16 Bourdon
8 Diapason
8 Gross Flute
8 Tibia
8 Cello
8 Violer d'Orchestre
5-1/3 Viole
4 Flute
16 Tuba Profunda
8 Harmonic Tuba
8 Clarinet
8 Orchestral Oboe
Bass Drum
Kettle Drum
Cymbal

ACCOMP:

16 Gemshorn
16 Gamba
8 Gross Flute
8 Gamba
8 Viole d'Amour
4 Flute
4 Gamba
4 Viole
2-2/3 Quint
2 Superoctave
8 Tuba
8 Clarinet

4 Clarion
4 Clarinet
Tremolo
Harp
Octave Harp
Xylophone
Snare Drum Strike
Snare Drum Roll
Chinese Block
Tambourine
Tom-Tom
Birds

GREAT:

16 Contra Gamba
16 Gemshorn
16 Tibia
8 Open Diapason
8 Gross Flute
8 Gamba
8 Viole d'Amour
8 Tibia Clausa
8 Concert Flute
8 Viole D'Orchestre
8 Viole Celeste
4 Octave
4 Flute
4 Gamba
4 Violin
4 Tibia
4 Harmonic Flute

2-2/3 Quint
2 Superoctave
2 Piccolo
16 Tuba Profunda
16 Vox Humana (TC)
8 Harmonic Tuba
8 Clarinet
8 Orchestral Oboe
8 Vox Humana
4 Clarion
4 Vox Humana
Chimes f
Chimes p
Harp

SOLO:

16 Tibia Clausa
16 Bass Viol
8 Tibia
8 Concert Flute
8 Viole d'Orchestre
8 Viole Celeste
4 Tibia
4 Flute
4 Violette
4 Celestina
2-2/3 Twelfth
2 Flautino
8 Orchestral Oboe
8 Vox Humana
4 Vox Humana

Tremolo
Xylophone

EFFECTS:

Triangle
Birds
Auto
Telephone
Steamboat Whistle
Crash Cymbal

MISCELLANEOUS:

3 balanced swell shoes:
Accompaniment
Solo/Master (controlled by switch)
Crescendo
4 toe studs operating generals
1 toe stud operating Triangle
1 Sforzando pedal
8 pistons for Solo and Pedal
8 pistons for Great and Pedal
8 pistons for Accomp. and Pedal
8 generals
Cancel bar for each division
Combination action is of the "Capture" type
Austin "Universal Chests" and unit actions used throughout.

OLD THEATRE ORGANS NEVER DIE

In looking over the WurliTzer shipping list of some 2200 theatre organs, one cannot help but wonder what happened to all of them. This would apply especially to the smaller ones, since they for the most part were installed in smaller show-houses, and in recent years the mortality rate of small theatres has been heavy.

Very fortunately, a great number of these little gems have been saved either by removal to churches or by enthusiasts who have gone to almost any length to fit an honest-to-goodness theatre organ into a home.

For example, let's look at the journeys of WurliTzer No. 678. According to the WurliTzer Shipping List (THEATRE ORGAN, Volume 2, Number 1), this Style B, 2m/4r organ was shipped to the York Theatre, Los Angeles, California, August 7, 1923. Talkies were a long way off when No. 678 started cueing the antics of Doug Fairbanks, Vilma Banky, Lon Chaney, and other greats of that long, ago era. No doubt this little four rank "B" merrily played right up to the day that sound engineers checked out the new fangled equipment for synchronizing the "Jazz Singer" mechanically. It might have been used even after that, where sound records for current pictures were not shipped with the film. In such an event, the organist would be called on to fill in until the Vitaphone records could be found.

With the improvement of Sound on Film and other electronic gains which made the talkies reliable, the little WurliTzer was forgotten until it was disposed of and moved to a Southern California church. Naturally, the theatrical accessories (traps) had to be taken off. Except for that, our little four ranker had its second "permanent" home. It would probably have been there forever except for the hobby of Los Angeles traffic

engineers...building freeways.

The church was to be razed to allow for a freeway, and No. 678 was again so much surplus. At this point, Norman Lincoln of Monterey Park, California, an ATOE member, acquired the organ and incorporated it into his three manual organ (mostly Kimball). Norman has disposed of the console and relay, but the balance of the organ is singing happily in a home, and you can be sure that it is getting tender care.

About the York Theatre...it is now known as the Artisan Music Hall, and is being used by the Electronic Organ Arts, Inc., to show the Artisan Custom Organ and the Electronic Organ Arts line of products. The former pipe chambers are now loaded with speakers for the electronic organs.

As Mr. Lincoln says, "This should prove something or other!"

THE SWINGIN' AUSTIN

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at one point just above the right chamber, dropping plaster and tons of water into the pipes. Half of the pipes were smashed, the regulator fell apart, the bottom of the chest rotted away, and the floor of the chamber became rotten. The organ was still being used occasionally, but any notes that played at all in the right chamber were most likely ciphers. An usher was trained to pull out pipes as the ciphers developed, and there were more pipes off the chest than on it.

A West Hartford dentist, Dr. David Ginsberg, played the organ on Sunday mornings before the theatre opened, but other than that, the organ's future looked pretty dim. Several persons (some of them avid ATOE members now) made attempts at re-viving the right chamber, but soon

became disgusted, and left for better grounds.

Finally in October, 1959, Allen Miller discovered the organ while investigating the remaining theatre organs in Connecticut. The blower started on the first try, but the ciphers and dead notes were a sure sign that the organ needed work. Tackling the organ single-handedly for three months, Al got the left chamber in good order, but the right chamber, its air supply temporarily cut off, remained silent.

Then Al met Joe Tobin of West Hartford, and they both went at the right chamber in earnest. With help from Al's father, they removed the 200 pound regulator, and releathered it. With this done, a new bottom was made for the chest. The exciting moment came when the air was turned on, and the chest blew right off the floor, pipes and all. Cape Canaveral couldn't have done better! Since the floor of the chamber was rotten, the chest had to be firmly anchored to the 8" thick concrete floor underneath.

The removal of three layers of canvas which had been nailed over the swell shades brought out the original brilliance of the organ, and reports are that the organ now sounds better than ever.



ATOE member, Richard F. Kline, regular organist at Tivoli Theatre, Frederick, Maryland.



S. H. "Sal" Cargill at the console of his 3/26 WurliTzer in his home at Excelsior, Minnesota.

Fall, 1961



Those present at June 25, 1961 meeting of Ohio Valley Chapter. Glenn Merriam at the console.