

Chattanooga Group Goes To Work

Story by Bill Barger

Photos by Bob Johnson



WURLITZER 235 - 3/11 Rank TIVOLI THEATRE, CHATTANOOGA

A group of theatre organ enthusiasts has gone to work on the rebuilding of a long forgotten Wurlitzer pipe organ in the Tivoli Theatre in Chattanooga, Tennessee.

First, the theatre. The Tivoli was built in 1921 by the Signal Amusement Company at a cost of about one million dollars. It was a small replica of the Tivoli Theatre in Chicago designed by Rapp and Rapp, the famous theatre architects of that city. The doors first opened on March 19, 1921. The Tivoli had a "...concert orchestra and a \$30,000.00 Bennett organ..." to provide music. The theatre was bought by Paramount Publix in 1924 and the Bennett organ was replaced by a 3m/11r Wurlitzer. The Tivoli in its later years was operated by Wilby-Kinsey Theatres and that firm still controls the house.

Wilby-Kinsey closed the Tivoli on August 17, 1961. The city of Chattanooga leased the building on January 1, 1963 and is currently using it as a playhouse to augment the facilities at Memorial Auditorium.

The organ installed in February, 1924, by Publix is Opus 780. It has a somewhat unique history since parts of it were built in 1921. Parts of the organ are marked "San Diego" (one of the switch stacks), and one of the ranks of reed pipes (the Kinura) has the voicer's initials and the date "1921". However, the Wurlitzer factory shipping list dates

the organ, January 31, 1924; also, the voicer's initials on the Harmonic Tuba are dated "1924".

It is well known that the building is at least half of every organ; the success or failure of any and every instrument depends largely on its situation. The installation in the Tivoli is almost ideal in every way. The chambers are located above and behind the boxes on both sides of the house. The expression openings are adequate and the organ speaks through the proscenium arch. On both sides, extending about one-third of the way across, is a false ceiling which gradually slopes down, directing the sound down into the auditorium. This installation allows the sound to mix well and be heard equally well anywhere except in the back of the orchestra under the balcony. Because of this installation, the Main and Solo are not so separated that the sound is disjointed.

After its installation in 1924, the organ was played by C. Sharp Minor. There were several organists after him, but Jean Van Arsdale presided at the console longer than any other. During these times, she would provide intermission music while the stage crew changed from the vaudeville act to the picture or vice versa.

In 1939, it was decided that there would be no further use for the organ. "Gone With the Wind", the first picture to play in the Tivoli in wide-screen,

came along. During this picture the management decided to remove the organ console from the edge of the orchestra pit so they could re-install the three or four seats which had been removed years before to make room for it. The console cables were appropriately cut and the console was moved backstage where it proved to be "home sweet home" for the rats until 1960.

In 1960 several interested persons began to restore the organ. Some work was accomplished, but the theatre was closed in 1961 and the restoration project ceased.

As soon as the city had concluded their lease of the building, several members of the Southeast Chapter of ATOE sought and obtained permission to complete the work at no cost to the city.

The first task was to splice the console cable. In order to facilitate this, a new junction board was installed with work proceeding from there. Accompaniment contacts were replaced and a Great to Acc. 4' 2nd touch coupler was added.

The console, as it was discovered, was virtually a wreck. Many long hours of work and hundreds of dollars worth of materials were necessary to make it useable. Some of the parts of the combination action were lost while the theatre was closed; others have been used elsewhere in the organ. Therefore, the combination action was put on the bottom of the list of things to be repaired.

Over the course of the years, the Main (left) chamber had suffered extensive water damage. The leather in the entire organ proved to be in very poor condition. Gradually, after many hours of hard work by a group of dedicated enthusiasts, the instrument was brought to playable condition.

In the spring of 1963 the organ was first heard by the public as one of the features of the first annual Barbershop concert sponsored by the Rock City (Chattanooga) Chapter of the SPEBSQSA (Society for the Preservation and Encouragement of Barber Shop Quartet Singing in America). This performance was a great success. In fact, many thought that the organ presentation was the star of the program rather than the



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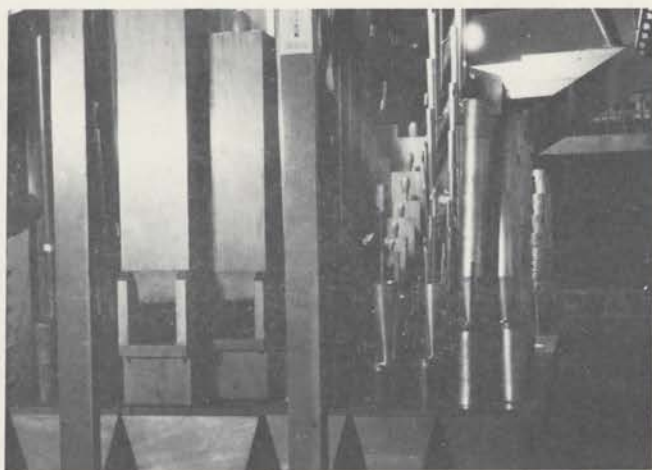
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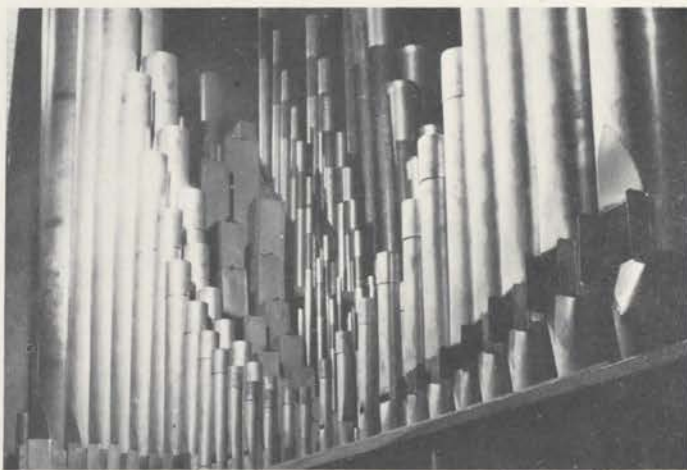
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SOLO CHAMBER

Ranks from left to right: Tuba, Tibia, Orchestral Oboe, Kinura, Vox Humana.



MAIN CHAMBER

Ranks from left to right Diapason, Viole Celeste (not seen), Flute Viole d'Orchestra Salicional, Trumpet.

Barbershop quartets. The organ was played by Bill Barger.

The organ has an unusually good live sound. The outstanding ranks include the Tibia, Diapason, and Strings. The ideal placement allowed the Wurlitzer Company to finish the voicing of the organ properly without having to force any single rank for extra volume. The large Solo Tibia is especially effective. One can play with only the flue stops and the Tibia blends beautifully, yet it is big enough to use by itself and produce the effect of almost as much volume as the entire flue ensemble. The Diapason

is small enough to have produced favorable comments from church organists, yet serves its purpose. The Strings are brilliant and sound more like six ranks than only three. The full organ has an extremely thrilling sound.

After hearing the initial public performance of the instrument, its wonderful sound, and the many enthusiastic comments, the group who tackled the partial restoration decided to go all out and put the instrument in mint condition. The work on this expanded project has continued since the memorable SPEBSQSA concert in 1963.

Those involved in this major restoration project include Mr. and Mrs. Robert L. Johnson, Mr. and Mr. F. Russell Lockmiller, Mr. and Mrs. Henry Dicks, Bill Barger, Gary Mull, Lynn McCrory, and Clay Holbrook. The Chattanooga group has made special mention of Ben Landress, Manager of the Tivoli and his staff for their cooperation and assistance; Steve Brown, house organist at the Tennessee Theatre in Knoxville, and Mr. W. R. Bradberry, representative of the M. P. Moller Company, for their help and valuable advice.