

# A Pioneer Movie Organ

by E. Jay Quinby

The New York WANAMAKER Organ definitely deserves a place in the early history of organ music for cinema accompaniment. The auditorium into which it spoke was modest in size, but there was nothing modest about that organ. It was a sizable creation, powerful and versatile. When this Astor Place organ was first introduced to the public, feature movies were a distinct novelty, and for the benefit of shoppers who wanted to relax and rest their weary feet, Wanamaker's Store provided a novel form of entertainment that had not yet been introduced in the city's theatres, - movies with organ accompaniment. An accomplished Organist named Depew presided at the four manual console, which boasted an impressive array of colorful stop-tabs and pilot lights.

At first, my favorite seat was front center in the U-shaped balcony where I could observe both the screen and the performance of the Organist whose position was at the left of the stage. The first feature movie offered was a three-reel thriller entitled THE MIDNIGHT RIDE OF PAUL REVERE. For this, Depew used Wagnerian music, and while Paul galloped through the suburbs of Boston on his white charger, Depew rendered a most effective interpretation of Wagner's RIDE OF THE VALKYRIE. The whole combination was so engaging that, having witnessed it on a Saturday afternoon when I was free from the routine of the Military Academy I was then attending at St. John's Cathedral (singing in the choir in exchange for my tuition), - I began playing "hookey" from week-day classes in order to soak up more of this fascinating entertainment.

This was particularly bad for my school record, in view of the fact that I was already in difficulties over my unauthorized penetration of the Cathedral itself, where E.M. Skinner and his staff were then installing a magnificent organ. Sneaking into that great, dark edifice after those admirable wizards had completed a day's work on the new instrument, I would turn on the blowers and

try out the various stops already completed. Always intending to keep the illicit experiments soft and subtle, my enthusiasm would sometimes prompt me to let out a few sforzando snorts, - whereupon the Night Watchman, alerted in his shanty a block away, would suddenly appear out of the shadows and grab me by the scruff of the neck and drag me off to the Headmaster's office. For these transgressions, I was sentenced to "walking guard duty" with a musket that I could hardly lift on my shoulder while my classmates enjoyed recesses on the baseball diamond or the football field. My interest in the organ was viewed very dimly by the authorities of that institution where strict discipline was the keynote. Although the term had not yet been invented, I'm sure that I would have been classified as a Juvenile Delinquent. However, the Headmaster described me in his letter to my father as becoming incorrigible, and threatened to expell me unless I could be induced to mend my ways. My father undertook appropriate measures to accomplish this, - with the back of a hairbrush applied where it would be influential although not injurious.

Hence, being already in enough trouble over my passion for organ, when I was put on the rack to explain my unauthorized absence I felt it would be indiscreet to admit that I had been off listening to organ music, - so I made up stories about visiting various amusement parks, such as Coney Island or Fort George. That evidently sounded plausible enough, and won me a few more hours of sentry duty.

Having thoroughly learned the screen sequences of THE MIDNIGHT RIDE OF PAUL REVERE, I relocated my favorite seat at the Wanamaker Auditorium to the end of the front row at the right hand extremity of the U-shaped balcony. There I could get a better bird's-eye-view of Depew's manipulations, - and get the full treatment from the Great Organ division which spoke loud and clear into my right ear. And on occasions, I could catch a glimpse of the impressive rows of pipes which became visible in the shadows through the ornate plaster-of-paris decorative grille, - when the intrepid Depew opened the swell-shades. On one occasion, an Organ Technician had switched on the lights within this chamber, and I could see him prowling around looking for a cypher. I was disappointed when he located it and yanked the offending pipe from its socket, - and

promptly switched off the lights.

The severe rebukes and penalties I received for my interest in the King of Instruments back in those days made me resolve that SOME day, when I would reach manhood, - I would SOME how acquire an Organ of my own, - and there would be no so-and-so to shake an admonishing finger at me and tell me nay. But the rebukes never prevented me from revisiting the Wanamaker Auditorium when the urge became irresistible, especially when, after the first three months a new film was at last acquired to replace the worn-out MIDNIGHT RIDE OF PAUL REVERE. They did succeed in teaching me a few things at St. John's Cathedral, but they eventually gave up trying to suppress my interest in the organ. When my voice changed, I was swiftly graduated, - going down in the records, I presume, as a lost cause.

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