

OF KIMBALLS AND DIAPHONES

by Stevens Irwin

Stevens Irwin is best known for his detailed Dictionary of Pipe Organ Stops. Retired from his teaching career, Steve has turned to his pipe organ hobby more and more until now he uses his St. Petersburg (Florida) home only as a laundry stop between trips to inspect organs. Always hot after material with which to update his publications he does a great deal of listening to organ qualities, not to music played on the rank, just the sounds of the pipes individually. Partial to the theatre organ (although his publishers insist his books be church organ oriented), Steve has become particularly fond of the Kimball pipe sound. The following article is a ramble through his experiences with various big auditorium and theatre Kimballs and with the people associated with them. From the theatre organ fan's viewpoint much of it will be considered highly controversial. It may even raise a few temperatures. But it's the meanderings of a guy hip to many of the things dear to T.O. fans. When we asked him to do this article on Diaphones we figured that he couldn't insert much "square wave" material into the 32' octaves -- but he did anyway. Meet Stevens Irwin's Kimballs!

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I guess I became interested in Kimball theatre organs when I was a grade-schooler. I was born and brought up in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, the home of the famous Amish and Dutch sects. Nearby in Coatesville, of Lukens Steel Fame, was The Auditorium, a movie house that ran new pictures. It has a beautiful Kimball of two large chambers (right and left-stage) with two manuals. I dreamed for years, as only a child can, of getting my hands on it, and finally did when the high school ran two literature type movies and I was asked to accompany them, as I was a senior by then. That was my first encounter with a Kimball organ.

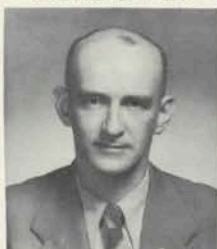
I also had another unforgettable experience when I was about 12 years of age; one day that will live long in my memory my mother took me through the huge John Wanamaker Store in Philadelphia. I will never quite recover from the incredible burst of sound that I suddenly heard from the great Audsley-designed organ that had recently been taken there from a warehouse in St. Louis. It is much enlarged now, and with many ranks of Kimball French Horns, Vox Humanas, Oboes and, of course, the well-known 88 ranks of manual and 41 ranks of pedal Strings. But in 1923 it was much smaller than it is now with its 30,067 pipes and 451 ranks and eight 32' ranks. Recently John McCormack

was appointed head of the organ department, even to supervision of the organists who display its glories from time to time. His predecessor, Bill Ruff has just retired. Bill should be given a very loud vote of thanks for the beautiful condition of the organ he cared for so many years. Although he had Mr. McCormack to help him he had a tremendous job with rebuilding the blowers, re-leathering, and keeping in tune the forests of pipes. This is a clean organ and one that operates easily, its sound showing the beautiful care expended by these two men, and others, for so many years. Incidentally, this organ stands pretty much in tune all the time; its chambers do not touch any outside wall, although some Reeds occasionally need touching up. The heavy-walled pipes and solid blocks in the Reeds in this organ should be a lesson to modern builders who continually decrease the amounts of material and gauges of metal and wood in order to lighten the weight of the instrument and make handling easier. Not so in this great monster; it is really solid, as anyone could attest who has had a trip through its innards to see the fabulous 32' wood Open Diapason and numerous Diaphones and 16' wood ranks. It is relatively easy to maintain in spite of its great size and thus is always far from a marginal zone between unsatisfactory and satisfactory operating condition.

This organ has in its nine divisions many accompaniment stops -- something the theatre organ does not have enough of, even in large examples. But it also has a great number of solo stops to play against and in the numerous choirs of 16', 8', and 4' Chorus Reeds (Tubas and Bombardes) it has registers that stand out with individual distinction. Recently Nelson Beuchner played for me on the Massed 17 ranks of Dulcianas in the String division. The silky, smooth tone of these stops should be more appreciated by theatre players, who too often have no sort of "median gray" tone color for their tone pictures. It is this neutral color that makes the more vivid Oboe, Kinura, Celestes, and Flutes hold together in a whole tone, which is necessary in popular music. The Wanamaker Dulcianas (tuned normal, sharp, and flat) are Kimballs and there is no corrosion or lack of timbre due to creeping metal crystals in them. Even though small in scale they are heavy-walled and beautifully soldered. Theatre people can be thankful that their organs came out of the early decades of this century, for this fact alone insures that they have in their garages, cellars, and bed rooms solid, well-made pipes that will give good tone over many years, whether of wood or metal. Theatre pipes hold timbres.

The biggest Kimball ever built is in the Minneapolis (Minn.) Auditorium. It is in quite good condition. The Lutheran World Federation met there a few years ago and required the city to bring it up to snuff. I played it two hours not long ago and saw every pipe in it, thanks to my good friend Clyde Olson, a member of the ATOE Chapter there. The Auditorium manager now plans to move the two consoles from the under-main-floor positions in front of the orchestra pit, putting one in each lower box at either side of the stage. A console with horseshoe and stop keys is on the right and a draw-knob is on the left. Noteworthy in this organ are a very large 32' open wood Diapason high on the right of stage, unenclosed but behind the screen, and a Melophone 8' (spelled with one "l" when it's a Solo Flute) at left stage and high up in the Solo division. Believe me, when you make a 64' Resultant out of this 32' Diapason (that is only 8.17 cycles per second at lowest CCCCC) you can really hear it and don't have to imagine you do. The wood Melophone 8' has inverted lips and wide mouths, which give it a solo-horn tone and make it seem like a very solid, open Tibia Clausa, if you can imagine such a thing. Strangely enough, this giant has no String Organ. It needs one, and W. W. Kimball (on my recent visit to him) did not remember the reason for this omission. It certainly wasn't a space problem, because there is room

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enough back of the grills. In fact, a Vox Humana Chorus of at least nine ranks would be useful here too. Voxes are useful all the way from 32' up to 2', with open metal flues above the "change-over" note at high A (over two octaves above middle C). The Germans have a 32' Vox. Why can't we? I deplore the fear of the unusual in stops and pipes which many Americans have.

The next Kimball in size is in Memorial Auditorium in Worcester, Mass. This too is a civic project. It is on both sides of the huge stage. This organ has the most beautiful Diapasons and Mixtures to corroborate their natural harmonics, as Audsley would say. (Radio City's Wurlitzer has a couple of Mixtures to do the same thing as well as make the Chorus Reeds louder.) This brings out the fact that there is little difference between basic stops in Baroque, Classical, Church, and Theatre organs, as witness the Diapason, Dulciana, Gemshorn, Harmonic Flute, Trumpets, Oboes, Regals, and the 16' pedal Reed in all of these types. However, the manner of voicing them and their wind pressures are quite different.

Fine stops in the Worcester Kimball are numerous but the 32' Contra Violone at left stage (probably of poplar) is an ideal to be imitated! It is on high pressure and has large round harmonic bridges. For those of you who like a staccato String-Bass (without tremulant) this stop would be pure joy to hear. The organ projects its sound well far out into the great auditorium. The soft stops carry well and the console is easy to handle. Chambers are a little on the deep side but so are they in Minneapolis and even at Wanamakers. This and other Kimballs have the hand set adjustment knobs that enable any or all swells to work from any shoes.

The other large Kimball civic installation is in Memphis Auditorium and this one is installed differently from the other two. It is on top of the long stage and therefore the pipes can play to either side of the stage into a large or small theatre. The old dismantled Hope-Jones in Denver Auditorium also did this but the pipes there were on-stage, not above it. Stops at Memphis are not so distinctive and it is not easy to judge from the consoles how the blend is coming out. This is a really big instrument but its tone isn't so impressive as Minneapolis or Worcester. Here, as in other city-owned auditoriums, the management is always interested in the large slice of their budget the organ takes for maintenance. But a convention, particularly a church group, is more likely to come to a location where a large pipe organ is available, particularly if it is well tuned and in good mechanical condition. The psychological advantage given by the organ is real. Those who have had the privilege of "opening up" these big instruments, including the three or four 32' basses and the vast power of the big Tubas and Trumpets, not to speak of Stentorphones and larger Diapasons, fully realize that no other sound is so suggestive of the power of the Almighty or the majesty of a grand procession. Opened up, they really make the concrete floors shudder and the assistant managers come out of the walls and edge up to the one at the console to tactfully suggest that the telephone operator can do a better job without the fearful oscillations of the big Diaphone. As Bill Rosser in Convention Hall told me, "Play loud when you want to get thrown out!"

And there is often a big Diaphone at 32', 16' and 8' in these Kimballs, including the theatre models too. This stop, so beloved by organ fans of all periods since about 1885, does a few things we might mention here that no other deep bass can do. It makes a "square wave" (mitigated, of course), whereas the loudest Diapason of like pitch makes a "sine wave" that is more pendulum-like and gentle to the ear and much less penetrating. It has few harmonics to give it color and therefore destroys timbre in higher pitches sounding with it. It is of wood in almost all cases, which gives it a

very soft formant and also one that appears in the tone a little later than the note itself.

Other Kimballs are still around but the top ones have sometimes been rebuilt and builders like to place their name-boards on them because they are so desirable a sound to be associated with. The Warner Wiltern Theatre in Los Angeles rarely misses mention in an issue of any theatre magazine, so our flair for the big, warm Kimball sound is always covered, except to say that its specification should be studied more by theatre organ lovers. In this organ the Strings at right stage and all the Echo stops (difficult to keep in tune) are unusual. Kimball did indeed make beautiful soft effects, and the Baroque followers (some of whom are reading this) must indeed suffer from want of the gentle, placid, limpid sound a true Baroque ensemble makes. The soft sound in any organ is important for contrast Dull shades, accompaniment, and background effects are always needed in all schools of composition. Only variety pleases the musical sense.

These big Kimballs, it must be admitted, all need more mixture work, for this, when properly tuned, is pitched perfect (rather than equal-tempered) and blends with the overtones in the big Trumpets and Diapasons and Flutes without sticking out like a sore thumb. The reason builders in the 1875 to 1935 era discarded mixtures was that they figured the natural overtones of the pipes would supply these very much needed tonal components, which they did, to be sure, but not with a whole series.

This is the essence of real power and majesty in an organ: to have yet another whole series of overtones on top of each overtone in each stop. Do you realize that more than 85% of the tonal components you hear are off the notes of the regular scale in full-organ sound?

This article is too long already, but I cannot resist telling the story of some minor damage done by a 32' Hope-Jones Diaphone (the location must go unmentioned). I was sitting down to try out each stop separately, as is my custom, so that I can hear it clearly in all parts of the compass, when I noticed the terrified look on one of the choir member's faces. I started to try the pedal stops, running over them swiftly and when I came to the big fellow this person became very excited and asked me to quit at once because the Diaphone had been the cause of one of the tall golden display pipes falling on the choir seats recently. Fortunately, no one was hurt.

Like the Tibia, Vox Humana, and smooth English-type Diapasons, the Diaphone 16' and 32' has become a symbol of theatre-organ sound, and without it we miss the "bottom" under the full organ as well as the tympani-like percussive action it has on our ears. And Kimball made some of the best.

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