

ARSENE SIEGEL

A MUSICIAN'S MUSICIAN

by L. R. Clarke

"If I can't play good music, I'd rather not play at all." That pretty well sums up the philosophy of Arsene Siegel, a Top-Notch organist of great dedication. Now in his mid 60's he is still a man of great strength which can be attributed to his passion for physical fitness ranging from wrestling, long distance swimming and judo in past years.

Today when not playing the organ, Siegel gets his greatest pleasure from the company of his 7 year old granddaughter.

Born at the turn of the century in Lyons, France, Arsene, a brilliant pianist even as a child, arrived in the United States at the age of 12; started playing professionally at 14 and still plays nightly.

His father, travelling with a professional vaudeville group in the U. S. for two years gave no indication of returning to France so the impatient mother brought Arsene and his sister to this country. They traveled along with the elder Siegel and as often as possible Arsene would make good use of the piano in the pit before and after performances. Before long the Siegels settled in Chi-

ago, renting a furnished apartment at Erie and State St. Arsene has a vivid recollection of the cold living room where he practiced most of each day and his two weekly lessons at Kimball Hall with Adolphus Sthal. At this point he still had hopes of being a concert pianist. Eventually the family could afford only one lesson a week and later even that was too much and he had to work to help support the family.

So at the age of 14 he joined the ranks of musicians playing for the silent movies. Although this may seem a tender age to start a career, it was no drawback, as Arsene was almost full grown by this time. In any case managers considered these pianists a necessary evil and seldom asked their ages. Their attitude seemed to be "If you were big enough, you were old enough."

Competition was extremely keen in spite of the fact that working conditions were anything but desirable and you were expected to play continuously thru the entire picture without a break. Usually you worked directly below the screen and the pit was often cold and drafty with an occasional rat running over your feet.

To further complicate matters Arsene was extremely independent and would now and then play a concerto or a Chopin Etude at a most inopportune time much to the dismay of the manager who ran down the aisle only to be told where to go. This attitude led to many abrupt hurried exits.

Once when searching for a job, a booking agent in the Bijou Dream theatre building on State St. gave Siegel a sealed envelope and directed him to the manager of the Bijou Dream theatre. On appearing he was immediately instructed to play the piano and then given another sealed envelope for the booking agent. Apparently satisfied that he could play, the agent placed him in the Loyola Theatre (Sheridan Rd. near the Loyola "L" Station). Soon after he started, the manager informed Arsene he was also expected to play the organ. This was the first attempt at the organ and it was nothing less than disastrous. The manager liked his work on the piano but suggested he contact the Wurlitzer people for organ instructions. This engagement proved to be very short and he was not asked to play the organ again.

He recalls his first visit to the Wurlitzer studios where a demonstrator "showed" him the organ. The demonstration was poignant. "Turn it on here, these stops control the top manual, these control this lower manual and these are for the pedals that you play with your feet." With this "complete" lesson the demonstrator left the room.

Thus he had to shift for himself and as often as possible was at this studio organ developing orchestral effects. Whenever possible Wurlitzer had him play the two manual organ they had installed in the dining room of the Rothchild Dept. store (now Sears on South State St.).

Around 1914 he was kept busy playing in many theatres equipped with the Photoplayer, however, Wurlitzer installed a new three manual organ in the Wabash Ave. Studio. It fascinated Arsene. He spent as much time as possible learning this organ.

One day when engrossed in arranging and playing the Tannhauser overture, he was startled — on finishing — to receive a "big hand" from uninvited guests, who had entered the studio. One was Mr. Libbin, Manager of the Cincinnati, Ohio Wurlitzer store, who immediately offered him a job as demonstrator, plus his choice of available openings in local theatres.

On his arrival in Cincinnati the Wurlitzer staff took him on a round of the "Houses of Pleasure" to play their photoplayers, and to the various theatres. While in Cincinnati, Arsene demonstrated and taught all the Wurlitzer



Arsene Siegel shown playing at a jam session in Burlington, Wisc. during the ATOE 1965 Chicago Meeting.

models during the day; played nightly in various theatres. This could have been the turning point in his career, but as a boy of 15 he soon found himself homesick; he returned home.

Back in Chicago he resumed playing the photoplayer in various small theatres. He was lucky to make \$18.00 per week playing seven days from 7 to 11:30 and a matinee on Saturday and Sunday.

The Seeburg people were beginning to make their photoplayer and through them, he was offered a job in Moline, Ill. which he gladly accepted. This lasted three years and gave him free time during the day to study philosophy, religion and write music. He also spent considerable time in the gym wrestling, boxing and sparring with pros. He even considered entering the prize ring. Long distance swims in the Mississippi was also a favorite pastime. The only piano recital he ever gave was during this stay in Moline. He played his compositions only, which were well received.

It was during this time that Mr. Bennett of the Bennett Organ Co. approached Arsene advising that he was building a theatre organ and would like to have him look it over. What Arsene saw he liked and then learned that they were building the organ for a new theatre in Davenport, Iowa. He was being considered for the job of organist and for fear that he might not accept, they asked what they could include in the organ to make it interesting to him. Arsene asked for two large Kettle drums, a Chinese gong and a grand piano in the pit. He'll never forget the bedlam in Chicago the day they arrived at Lyon & Healy from Moline. It was Armistice Day 1918. The gong was hung next to the console and was struck manually. The piano was used only as a diversion and was independent of the console.

The Davenport Liberty theatre was completed in 1919 and he started Jan. 15, for \$45.00 per week for seven 8-hour days.

In 1920 one vaudeville act remains in his memory. A young lady, who was to dance, did not like his music and he did not like her selections or style. They fought from the moment they met but they compromised by getting married a week later. Finally he left Davenport for a job at Barbee's Loop Theatre (now the Monroe) in Chicago. This was also a Bennett organ installation, which he played for two years until he left abruptly after a fight with the owner.

That year, 1920, he won the Chicago Musical College Felix Borowski Scholarship for composition. Much of his skill as a composer he credits to his later studies with the famed Chicago composer, Felix Borowski.

About this time the Smith Organ Co. started to make theatre-type organs.



Arsene Siegel seated at the Ex-Fisher Wurlitzer at the time of his recent concert for the Detroit Theatre Organ Club. 30 years before this, Arsene had presided over the same organ.

They were much like Wurlitzer and Arsene demonstrated and taught from the Wabash Ave. studio where they maintained an excellent 4-manual organ. Sales were not good and as larger and more deluxe theatres were being built, he applied for a job with Balaban & Katz.

Arsene recalls his first encounter with Jesse Crawford in charge of hiring organists at B & K, who was very busy and with little to say. Reluctantly he was offered a job playing a small organ with a draw-knob console in the far west side of Chicago. Arsene refused.

Regardless of the ability of the individual organist, Jesse Crawford controlled the B & K organists with an iron hand and you either acceded to his dictates or you didn't work for B & K.

Arsene accepted an offer from another chain of theatres, playing in the Lakeside and for two years he played a very small Kimball organ hating every minute of it. The turning point came when the little Kimball organ was replaced with an excellent sounding, well equipped 2-manual Wurlitzer. Arsene had then an instrument on which he could show his ability and he began to attract attention.

While on the job one evening Arsene was tapped on the shoulder by an usher from the Riviera theatre and advised that Mr. Louis Lipstone, Conductor at the Riviera, and Musical Director for B & K Chain, wanted to see him. Mr. Lipstone asked if he would be interested in working for B & K and if so would he please

contact Jesse Crawford at the Chicago Theatre.

Mr. Lipstone was surprised to hear that Arsene would not consider any job with B & K as long as he had to be hired by Jesse Crawford. Lipstone, shrugging his shoulders, assured Arsene that it was merely a formality.

His next meeting with Crawford was more amiable. Jesse Crawford and his wife were practicing after hours at the twin consoles in the Chicago theatre. As Arsene walked in, Crawford looked up and said "Oh you are the blonde boy, I remember you very well." Thus began Siegel's long association with B & K. His first job started at the Roosevelt in the morning and the Riviera in the afternoon.

When construction on the Uptown was started, he learned he was to be house organist. At first he used the piano because the organ installation was far from completed. What began as entertainment for theatre patrons before the picture started, turned into a daily radio broadcast. He then realized the vastness of his audience. He found great pleasure in receiving fan mail and hundreds of requests. About this time he decided to take a refresher course from pianist Henoit Levy who helped him brush up on the fine points of phrasing so often overlooked. His playing improved noticeably and he developed the art of reaching the

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heart of an audience in entertaining them. To bring forth the inherent beauty of many varied types of music has remained a great personal satisfaction to him as well as the thousands of audiences he has played for.

Dean Fossler, second organist at the Chicago, was transferred to the Michigan theatre in Detroit and Arsene was then moved up to the Chicago theatre. However, much to his disappointment this move proved to be temporary as Dean Fossler soon returned to the Chicago and Arsene found himself back at the Uptown console.

The Vitaphone sound installations were raising havoc and despair with the organists and after two years at the Uptown he was sent to the Fisher theatre in Detroit. Many had preceded him to the Fisher and few had lasted more than two weeks. The organ he found in the Fisher was one of the finest he had ever played. It was almost tailor-made for his repertoire. He fell in love with the organ and stayed for five years until the depression closed the organ. This was a sad day for Mr. Siegel. He remembers the day well and does not hesitate to admit that he shed a few tears as he played the last notes on the final day. Little did he realize that thirty years later he would play the same Fisher Theatre organ, in perfect condition, to a capacity house.

Looking back, he recalls a very unusual performance while at the Fisher. Arthur Gutow, also an excellent organist and formerly at the Chicago Theatre, was

playing at Detroit's Michigan Theatre. Radio Station WGR, Detroit presented a simultaneous broadcast from the two theatres. Wearing earphones they were in direct contact with each other as they played a program of organ duets.

During the depression years he worked in the Tuxedo theatre in Highland Park, Mich. With a wife and two children to support he was most grateful to have this job.

Around this time the Hammond organ appeared, to the blessing of many organists. His first job on the Hammond was in Cadillac's showroom where new cars were being shown for the first time. The novelty of the new instrument created more interest than the cars on display.

Eventually it was back to Chicago and many types of jobs followed. Early in 1940 one evening he was playing a Novachord in the L'Aiglon Restaurant and Nate Platt of the Chicago theatre invited him to his table. He inquired if he would be interested in returning to the Chicago theatre. This began a seven year stay which ended when the organ was discontinued in 1947. In addition he played only New Year's Eve for the following five years.

It was during these seven years that Arsene Siegel was able to concentrate on his compositions. He became a member of A. S. C. A. P. and eventually published over 100 compositions for piano, organ, voice and orchestra with nine publishers. He has recorded on the Rondo label with the Hammond organ and on the Replica label using the Oriental theatre organ and the Replica studio pipe organ.

After leaving the Chicago theatre he resumed Cafe and radio work and eventually became staff organist at A. B. C.-W. B. K. B. TV devoting his full time to writing, arranging and playing TV shows. He remained there for seven years until 1959 when live TV shows were virtually discontinued in Chicago.

Today he teaches regularly and is dedicated to that profession. He works hard with his students and seldom watches the clock.

In 1962 he was approached by the Detroit Theatre Organ Club to perform on the Fisher Theatre organ, now known as the Fisher/Orbits Wurlitzer which they had restored to perfection in their own quarters. More than 2 years followed before this program was possible. Late into the night and most of the next day prior to the performance they reset as many pistons as possible and Arsene refreshed his memory, for this was the organ he had played 30 years ago and loved so much. He was impelled to do justice to the group who had invited him to play.

We who were there remember only too well the personal satisfaction this devoted musician realized at the end of the program.

After it was over he confided with us that when he got to the theatre and sat at the console, for the first time in so many years, he was thinking fast for some way to get out of playing.

Today Arsene Siegel has his own two-piano concerto and a complete musical play, both of which are ready for anyone interested. Presently he is more or less settled performing in a cafe.



THE CHICAGO THEATRE

Opened in October of 1921 with a seating capacity of 4000. This palatial movie palace was designed by the Rapp and Rapp architectural firm of Chicago.

