



Detroit Theater Organ Society

April 2011 Newsletter

Volume 50, Issue 3

DONNIE RANKIN IN CONCERT

Redford Theatre

Sunday, April 10, 2011 3:00 p.m.

The Detroit Theater Organ Society is proud to welcome back Donnie Rankin to perform for us. Donnie will be performing at the Redford Theatre on Sunday afternoon, April 10th at 3:00 p.m..

Donnie Rankin first took an interest in the theatre organ at the tender age of three when he first

heard the sounds of the Mighty Wurlitzer at the Civic Theatre in Akron, Ohio. Following that initial introduction to the King of Instruments, he frequently played on his great-grandfather's home organ. In 2000 Donnie

acquired an instrument and began taking formal lessons. Classical piano training followed in 2005, and his budding talent quickly blossomed into first rate musicianship.

Since then, Donnie has won several organ competitions and awards, including being named the Overall Winner of the American Theatre Organ Society's Young Theatre Organist Competition in 2007.

Donnie began studying with noted organist Jelani Eddington in September 2007. Since that time, Donnie has performed for theatre organ audiences from coast to coast. He resides in Ravenna, Ohio, and is a staff organist at the Civic

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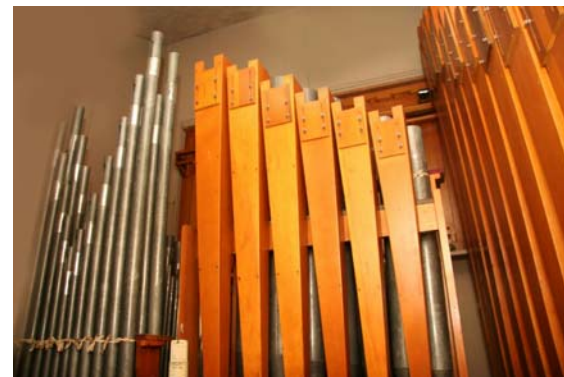


DONNIE RANKIN CONCERT ... *continued from the first page*

Theatre in nearby Akron - playing the very same organ Donnie first heard when he was three years old.

When he has free time, he enjoys: boating, bowling, cinematography, photography, cycling, archery, marksmanship, and assorted backyard sports.

Some more productive hands-on activities he's been involved with include re-soldering PC boards for home organs, and restoring antique tractors, his latest a 1966 John Deere.



FROM THE PRESIDENT'S BENCH

Dick Leichtamer
President, Detroit Theater Organ Society

The fragrance of spring is trying to waft through the air to our nostrils, but old man winter keeps getting in the way. Well, typical of March I guess. Warm weather will be approaching fast before we know it. And, so will May 15th - the re-opening of the Senate Theater. Much renovating has been accomplished. Many Board members and other members have been working very hard to get things ready. However, there is still much to do.

Our lobby looks kind of shabby with some of the mirrors missing from the wall from years ago. The Board doesn't have the money right now in phase one to replace them. Maybe you can help. The cost to replace the mirrors would run around \$1,400. Your donations could make that happen.

The other shabby feature is the lobby floor out in the refreshment area. We had bids of \$1,800 to clean the floor down to where it was when the theater opened. It would be much brighter. Here again your wonderful donations could make that happen.

If you would like to donate, we have two ways that you could help.

You can write a check, payable to Detroit Theater Organ Society, marked mirror fund or floor fund and send it to our treasurer,

Robert Weil
Senate Theatre
6424 Michigan Avenue
Detroit MI 48210-2957

You could also go to our web site (www.dtos.org) and follow the link to make a donation through our newly-created PayPal option. PayPal is a highly-secured online payment processing service that you could use, and the funds are immediately deposited into our accounts so that we can use them immediately for the ongoing restoration work.

Please be as generous as you can
Sincerely,
Your Board of Directors,
Dick Leichtamer, President

THEATER RENOVATION UPDATE

Connie Masserant
DTOS Board of Directors

There has been quite a transformation since last month's update. The theater has been buzzing with workers.



The "Helping Hands" volunteer organization came in on Saturday morning, March 19, with approximately 45 people. They were able to wash every seat in the auditorium. Several volunteers painted the projection room which now looks like new. Thank you, Dr. Paul Ovares for painting that last wall. In addition, many people carried several items upstairs and downstairs that needed to be returned to their proper place. The artist's room was cleaned spotless which included a carpet shampoo.

The entire auditorium ceiling has been repaired and painted by Bucalo Drywall & Painting. What a fantastic job.

Our members and directors have been busy as well. The concession area has been emptied of "stuff" and is waiting to be cleaned and spruced up. The display boxes will receive a new face lift and we are hoping to be able to replace missing mirrors from donations. That leaves the floor wanting a little attention – specifically stripping and polishing.

We have a beautiful newly papered wall by the office. A big "Thanks" to Joan Brown and Craig



Brown for all of their hard work (hard work indeed!) stripping the old paper off, prepping the wall, and placing the new paper.

The opposite brick wall was dry-walled and is ready for paint. Thank You to George Orbits, Dave Masserant, Lance Luce, and Stephen Warner.

A special Thank You to the guys who carried a limitless amount of wooden pipe trays to the basement. That was a job only for supermen!! Thanks to Scott Smith, Jeff Slabaugh, Dave Calendine, Steven Ball, and Craig Brown. Now we have our concession area back.



THEATRE RENOVATIONS ... *continued from previous page*



You can see what Steven Ball does best.....

Yet to be done are a few minor repairs, much painting, hanging of pictures, decorating, and of course cleaning.

Every Saturday until May 15th is a work day at the Senate. We hope that you will come on one of those days to help. We usually start at 10:00 a.m. and stay as late until the last person leaves....usually anytime after 3:00 p.m..

If there are other days during the week anyone would like to come and work, let me know and I will most likely be available. Remember, we have a gated parking lot for security.



Scott's biggest fan!!!! GO Scott.

We can thank Fred Bruflodt for installing a brand new hot water heater in the ladies room. Many miscellaneous jobs and errand running was done by Gil Francis. Thanks Gil.

Connie Masserant
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YOU ARE INVITED!

**Board Meetings are held on the last Tuesday of every month. Meetings start at 7:00 p.m.
Come and be an active member of your organization!**

M EMBERSHIP

Gary Grzebienik
DTOS Board of Directors

It looks like 2011 will be a banner year for DTOS! With our expanded concert and event schedule, reopening of the Senate, on-going restoration of our Wurlitzer and major improvements in security, word is getting out that we're "back in business -- BIG TIME!" Of course we couldn't do it without your continued support and membership. As always, "THANK YOU!"

We're pleased to announce the addition of two new Playing Members, Dr. Paul Ovares and William Mollema, and three new Associate Members, David Ullin, John Ackroyd and Karen Balog to our band of theater organ enthusiasts. We hope they'll continue to enjoy many years of outstanding events and entertainment with the rest of us. Meanwhile, if you know of someone that might enjoy one of our concerts, why not

invite them as your guest (you can bring up to three for free -- the best entertainment deal in town!). Maybe they'll want to join, too.

This month, in addition to this newsletter, watch for two other important pieces of mail to arrive from DTOS. As a member, you'll be receiving a ballot for elections for several positions on our Board of Directors. With the Annual Meeting coming up at the end of this month, it's important that you return your ballot right away. In addition, DTOS will be publishing a Membership Directory in May. You'll be receiving a letter in the next week listing the contact information we have for you. If you have any changes, or would like to limit what is published in the directory, please return the letter with your instructions.

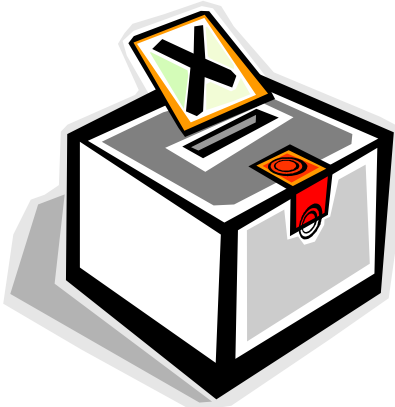


D TOS ELECTIONS THIS MONTH

Dave Calendine
DTOS Board of Directors

Very shortly all members of the Detroit Theater Organ Society will be receiving their ballot for the Board of Directors in the mail. Please take the time to read each person's information sheet and vote for the person you think would be the best candidate to be on the Board.

There are six openings on the Board for this election. There is also an opening on the Organ Trustees, and that will be a part of the election ballot as well.



The ballots are due by the Annual Meeting of the Membership on Tuesday, April 26th at 7:00 p.m.. All members are encouraged to be at the Annual Meeting. The results of the election will be announced at the end of the Annual Meeting.

You may either return your ballot in the mail (must be received by April 26th) or you may drop it in the ballot box at the Annual Meeting. Either way, PLEASE VOTE! YOUR VOICE MATTERS!

M AKING MUSIC AGAIN

Dave Calendine
DTOS Board of Directors

The Detroit area is lucky to have some great working theatre pipe organs. Three of the organs are still in their original home, which is a very rare thing these days.

Besides our one-of-a-kind Wurlitzer in our Senate Theater, we have the two pipe organs in the Fox Theatre downtown. Inside, there is the Moller organ in the lobby, which still has its operating roll player, and is the last known original lobby organ in the country. And organ enthusiasts can't forget the Mighty Wurlitzer in the main auditorium.

The other original installation of a theatre pipe organs is owned by our friends at the Motor City Theatre Organ Society. Inside their Redford Theatre is the wonderful Barton organ. Thanks to our friends there at the Redford we have been able to continue our concert series while we looked for a new home, and then decided to renovate our long-time home at the Senate.

This month I am happy to say that we get to add another long-silent Wurlitzer to the list of playing organs to the Detroit area list. Stagecrafters have been presenting quality shows at the Baldwin Theatre in Royal Oak for several years. The main theatre has had a Wurlitzer pipe organ installed for several years, however it had fallen silent due to several problems. With donations from the American Theatre Organ Society, the Motor

City Theatre Organ Society, and money saved up by Stagecrafters, the organ was brought into playing condition by our own member, John Lauter.

With John's hard work, the entire organ has gotten a new "breath of life." And by that, it has a new blower. The theatre was getting a lot of work done on it this past year. Part of the work required a large crane to be used. While the crane was there, a new blower for the organ was lifted up into the organ loft high above the main floor. New electric service for the organ was also installed. With the new reliable blower, John was able to then go through the entire organ and bring it back to life.

This month Stagecrafters and The Motor City Theatre Organ Society is proud to present a special program to re-dedicate the organ. John Lauter is teaming up with our own Lance Luce to present *100 Years of Broadway* on Friday, April 15th at 8:00 p.m. and Sunday, April 17th at 3:00 p.m.. Tickets for the special Gala performance on April 15th are \$18 and include an hors d'oeuvres intermission. Tickets for the performance on April 17th are \$16.



Join us as we celebrate with Stagecrafters, the Motor City Theatre Organ Society, John Lauter and Lance Luce as they re-dedicate this wonderful instrument



Renovations Continue!



There were several pipe trays built to move our organ. With us staying at the Senate, we had to get all of those trays out of the way. The trays made it from the lobby, down the aisle to the stage, then worked their way to the back stairwell, then they were stacked in the back portion of the basement. After the trays were moved, the rest of the wood was then taken down the same way and put in the basement as well. After several trips, the lobby is clear!



The console and piano are shown here after they were wrapped up for the fixing and painting of the ceiling. Great care was taken to make sure that no part of the organ would get damaged during the process.

This picture shows how the painters covered the entire auditorium. The front of the stage was also completely draped off so that the pipe chambers were protected.



After the projection booth was repainted, several volunteers from "Helping Hands" carried back up several cabinets and boxes to be put away. The pictures on the following page shows some of the work this great organization did when they were here.



From the editor—the following article is just the third part of a whole series of articles being written by Scott Smith regarding our Wurlitzer organ. Each newsletter will have another installment of the series, which will help you understand more about the history of our one-of-a-kind Wurlitzer theater pipe organ. Enjoy!

FROM THE BENCH

Scott Smith
Unraveling A Mayan Mystery, Part Three

In this writer's opinion, the possible influence of the Organ Department of W. W. Kimball of Chicago can be seen more clearly in the Fisher Wurlitzer than any other instrument not built by Kimball, save for the Radio City Music Hall Wurlitzer. Robert Pier Elliot, born in Holly, Michigan, is widely regarded as an under-sung hero from the Golden Era of the pipe organ. Aside from the company's head voicer, George Michel, it was Elliot who was the creative intellect behind the progressive tonal direction the Kimball company took after he accepted the position of General Manager in 1918. In an effort to make their organs more orchestral than the competition, Elliot established a policy of tonal makeup that mirrored the orchestra, and thereafter, one-third of all of the pipe ranks were strings of some sort. He left Kimball a few years before the Fisher organ was ostensibly conceived, but his ideas and influence remained at Kimball for many years to come. The volume of the Fisher organ's Solo Strings, being somewhat greater than its counterparts in other Wurlitzer organs, would seem to indicate an attempt to bring them up to the level of Solo Violins found in Kimball organs, which in some cases come across as sonic laser beams.

The Fisher organ boasted more string ranks than any other theatre Wurlitzer of any size, including the Fox Specials. Each of the strings in the Fisher organ was paired with a celeste: Solo String & celeste, Viol d'Orchestre & celeste, Salicional & celeste, Gamba & celeste, and if we overlook the opinion of certain academics who view them as foundation stops, we can include the Dulciana & Unda Maris. Ten strings, in all. It's a heavenly combination unlike any other anywhere.

The Publix #4 specification contained the Solo Strings, the Viols and the Gambas, but did not include the Salicionals. This is an interesting addition, especially when paired as a celeste as they are in the Fisher organ.

Perhaps this is yet another influence from Kimball, who would have likely included a pair of Salicionals in a spec of their own for this job. The Salicional is a medium-scaled string stop, included in the specification of nearly all Wurlitzer organs of either church or theatre persuasion, with few exceptions. It was their all-purpose string, and served the purposes well in either case. Closed down, they could serve as something akin to a Dulciana, but opened up to the hilt, could be almost as powerful as a Solo String. One could find them on instruments as small as the most basic three-ranker, and paired with a celeste when the organ got to just under ten ranks, especially in the earlier organs. From there on up to the biggest instruments, they would again appear as a barren unison string. Certainly no one could ever complain about hearing it celested as it is in the Fisher organ. Unlike most of Wurlitzer's other strings, like Viols or Solo Strings, which were made of tin, the Salicionals were made of spotted metal, which gave them a slightly darker tone than the former. The Gambas, which were also made of spotted metal, are essentially a larger scaled Salicional. The Voix Celeste, the official name for the Salicional celeste is one of only two ranks to lack an 8' bass octave in the Fisher organ; the other being the Harmonic Flute in the Foundation chamber.

It was not unusual to find the rather demure Dulciana on a Wurlitzer theatre organ, but it was unusual to find it paired with an Unda Maris. Only the Style 270 (4/21) had that as a standard pairing on a theatre organ, of which only four were built, and they all were installed in either England or Australia. Aside from that, it was not unusual to find the pair on a Wurlitzer church instrument. The almost inaudible Dulciana was an odd choice for any theatre instrument, as the most they ever seemed to do behind the heavily draped organ

screens was to color the Concert Flute, or more often than not, merely disturb the dust on the rack boards around the pipes. Even the legendary organist Jesse Crawford didn't seem to care for them as delivered. The set at the New York Paramount (4/36) was altered almost upon arrival by the equally legendary organ technician Dan Papp at Crawford's instruction, becoming something more resembling a small Diapason than a soft, fat string as originally voiced, and definitely more useful. All of that aside, the Dulciana and Unda Maris in the Fisher Wurlitzer do offer a pleasant accompaniment for the organ's many softer, imitative voices as used in orchestral transcriptions. However, in this writer's opinion, it would have been nice to have an equally soft 16' stop in the bass to balance, such as the Dulciana itself.

In addition to the veritable smorgasbord of tasty reed stops, the Fisher organ was also blessed with Wurlitzer's first Cor Anglais, one of only three ever produced by the company. This piquant stop, while no louder than most of the color reeds, figures prominently into the author's opinion that Kimball was Wurlitzer's strongest, and perhaps only serious competitor for this job. If so, it was not the first time the two titans of the theatre organ had competed head-to-head, nor would it be the last, but it may have been the most important and most defining for the two, save for Radio City Music Hall. Kimball's English Horn stop appeared primarily on their church and residence organs, having a rather unique and edgy tone. It's altogether possible the Fishers simply asked Wurlitzer if they could build one. What could they say? No? Hardly. Never having built one before, the company undoubtedly scrambled to figure out how to do just that, knowing full well that Kimball could. For as good as the Wurlitzers were at making musical instruments of every type, they were even better at making money. They didn't just throw it around, and when the opportunity arose, they wisely reused materials and fabricated items for more than just one purpose. In this particular application, they used the patterns from their Orchestral Oboe stop to create the pipe bodies for their prototype. Spotted metal, a combination of tin and lead was used in the upper portions of the resonators along with zinc stems for support, instead of their customary Hoyt metal, basically lead with a thin tin coating as you'd find on an Orchestral Oboe or most reed pipes of the same era.

The speaking length was altered to emphasize certain harmonics, and holes drilled strategically in the back of the resonators in order to further modify the sound. The end result was not exactly like Kimball, but it wasn't bad. To finish it off, the author believes that Wurlitzer purposely chose the more traditional name of Cor Anglais in order to avoid any implication of copying anything by Kimball (or any other company), and to imply a certain sense of leaning toward the claimed concert organ status.

When appearing on the original stoplists of three-manual Wurlitzer theatre organs of fifteen ranks or so, the plaintive Oboe Horn is found only on the Solo and Accompaniment manuals, but not on the Great. Furthermore, when the organ contained an Oboe Horn in the specification, it appeared to automatically have a Quintadena, too. Obviously, there were exceptions. Speculation has arisen over the years as to why, but the only plausible explanation that has come up is that these two stops could be found side-by-side in the same chamber of the earliest Wurlitzer organs. While we can understand that, why would the designer(s) at Wurlitzer keep both tabs off the Great, unless the organist coupled them down from the Solo? All that serves to do is to tie up another manual. Another curious factoid is that the later organs of four manuals automatically got both the Oboe Horn and Quintadena on the Great...except for the Publix #4 specification. Luckily, wiser heads prevailed and the Fisher organ got the Oboe Horn and both Quintadenas on the Great. Modern specifications seem to automatically go for ergonomics over tradition, and more often than not, we find the Oboe Horn and unison Quintadena now on the Great, Accompaniment and often the Pedal.

Musically, both stops often perform a somewhat similar function as blending or accompaniment voices, although the Oboe Horn occasionally receives the spotlight as a solo voice, while the shy Quintadena prefers the shadows. One interesting sidelight about Wurlitzer Oboe Horns is that they're not all alike as voiced by the factory. Later Oboe Horns, like the set in the Fisher organ appear to be soft and demure, while other, even slightly earlier sets are almost miniature trumpets, like the one in the Buddy Cole studio organ, made only a year earlier. Granted, there is a certain degree of latitude with regard to regulation in any reed

pipe, but when temporarily substituting a few of my own Wurlitzer Oboe Horn pipes to make the point, I found that no matter how hard I worked at regulating mine down in volume to match with the Fisher set, they were still louder. In his Hollywood Philharmonic Organ, George Wright peeled the caps off a Wurlitzer Oboe Horn and used it successfully as a Trumpet for some time before acquiring a real one, and at that point, soldered the caps back on so it could once again perform as an Oboe Horn.

Generally speaking, the Fisher organ is rather typical of the later era of voicing. The Tibias are darker, the Diapasons are brighter, some stops (like the Oboe Horn) were modified ever-so-slightly, and at least one was given a makeover. While Wurlitzer's ubiquitous one-size-fits-all string, the Salicional seems to have appeared in nearly every organ Wurlitzer made up to that point, it was given a new name not long before the Fisher organ came into being. In an apparent attempt to maintain their considerable sales lead over the competition, the Salicional was renamed the Violin primarily in the small-to-medium-sized organs and voiced with more sizzle; ostensibly to emulate and compete with those made specifically by Robert-Morton and Kimball (their two strongest competitors), both under that same stop name. One can only speculate that non-musical theatre owners who didn't know a Salicional from a Salisbury steak would understand what a Violin was. The idea was to sell organs. Already containing a sizzly Viol d'Orchestre and celeste in its specification, the Salicionals were added to the Fisher spec with the old name and the old, slightly darker voicing, apparently to provide more tonal options for the organist. The Fox Wurlitzers also contained a Salicional under that name, as did their very smallest organs. Some of the Fisher organ's more potent reeds, specifically the Tuba Horn, Tuba Mirabilis, Trumpet and English (Post) Horn are outstanding examples of Wurlitzer voicing of the late era, and are some of the best examples to be found anywhere that haven't been significantly altered in some way.

Other unique features include being the only theatre Wurlitzer ever produced with a 32' Sub Resultant in the Pedal. While the organ does not possess any actual stops that go below 16' pitch, the effect of a 32' stop is synthesized by wiring the low twelve bass notes

of the Pedal 16' Bourdon (Concert Flute) so that the note being depressed plays in addition to the note a perfect fifth above it (C and G, for example). Oddly, even the smallest theatre and church instruments built by competing firms contained this stop effect, while Wurlitzer, except for the Fisher organ, only included it in certain of their church organs. Apparently, Wurlitzer's stance was that if you wanted a 32' stop of any sort in your theatre, you should pay for it. Another feature in the Fisher organ was the expanded use of intermanual (between keyboards) and intramanual (within the same keyboard) couplers, particularly on the Great manual. Even the Fox Wurlitzer did not have an octave coupler on the Great manual until added later by a modern-day organ crew. The Fisher organ had one all along.

The Harmonic Flute stop, found only in Wurlitzer's church instruments and their very largest theatre organs appeared on the Fisher specification. Still, none of the others seem to "chirp" like the Fisher's set, which clearly leans more in the direction of a real orchestral flute. The Fisher spec offers the Harmonic Flute at exactly the same pitches on exactly the same manuals as the Fox, save for the 2' Harmonic Piccolo on the Bombarde manual. These two major instruments were delivered only two months apart in the Fall of 1928.

The 32-note independent wooden Open Diapason stop in the Pedal, while simply a Tibia Plena (a large, open flute) with a 16' bass extension, further adds to the non-theatrical stops. The "wood Open," as organists refer to them was a rather common bass stop in church organ of the 1920s, but rarely seen today. Their inclusion into any stoplist ensured some serious power (although not so much on speed) in the bass; so powerful, in fact that Wurlitzer's roller rink organs often included them at significantly higher wind pressures for a real wallop to help skaters count time. Once in a while, the almost colorless fat flute made its way into a Wurlitzer theatre organ in the manuals, but this is believed to be the only one serving completely as an independent bass stop.

Among the more curious stop tablets are those at 16' pitch on the Accompaniment manual. One would expect to find these on a small Wurlitzer, but not one the size of the Fisher organ. They can, however, be

found in the specifications of most any of the earliest four-manual, and later, the most basic four-manual Wurlitzers, like the Publix #1. While there's nothing documented, we tend to think these were there to aid transplanted pianists, who would access the 16' rank extensions by simply playing them in the bass end of the manuals instead of the pedalboard. We can only surmise that the Fishers did this for themselves; for those family members who played piano but not the organ, and for the aid of visiting pianists who simply wanted to take it out for a spin. Those tabs, by the way, are for the 16' Bourdon (Concert Flute), Diaphonic Bass (Horn Diapason), Solo String and Solo String Celeste. The odd thing here is that the Solo String Celeste would not extend below Tenor C (first C above low C), but would not have been registered by itself.

Knowing what we do about the disposition of Wurlitzer organs of this size, we can safely say that surprisingly little of the pipework would have been made up special for the Fisher organ. Namely, the Cor Anglais and the wooden Pedal Open Diapason. Everything else would be pretty much off the shelf. The French Horn, while rare, was not unique, and there would have been several sets made up that same year for the Fox Specials, and probably some church instruments. One interesting piece of information exists about the Gamba and Gamba Celeste ranks. While Wurlitzer made up a high percentage of their own pipework, there were times when production was at such a fever pitch that some sets were "farmed out" to pipe organ supply houses. During one of the ATOS conventions, Henry Gottfried was being escorted on a chamber tour, and upon viewing the markings scratched into the 4' C pipes of both of these sets, verified that those pipes were made up by A. Gottfried Organ Company of Erie, Pennsylvania, perhaps the most famous supply house of its time. Gottfried went on to say that they were instructed to voice the pipes with the toe openings "full open" for maximum volume, and then close them down severely to greatly minimize the volume in order that Wurlitzer could decide just how loud they wanted the pipes to be. One thing is clear: the Fisher organ shows signs of more attention to detail by the factory than most other Wurlitzer organs of the same era. While the Fishers would have undoubtedly spared no expense for their perfectly unique pipe organ, given the cost of

comparable Wurlitzers of the same era, the reported sale price of \$67,050 was surprisingly not far out of line.

Ironically, the percussion that helps to make the Fisher organ unique is the most visible - the Wurlitzer grand piano. Only a handful of Wurlitzer organs equipped with pianos ever had anything but an upright. One interesting fact about it is that the lid never was on the piano in the Fisher Theatre and only went on after coming into the possession of the club, as it was in a cove with virtually no overhead space.

The traps in the Fisher Wurlitzer's Pedal division offer up a small, but interesting departure from the standard Publix #4 stoplist. Those traps are: Bass Drum, Kettle Drum, Snare Drum, Crash Cymbal and Cymbal. The standard would have given the organist a simple toggle switch to divert those traps from 1st Touch to 2nd Touch, but the Fisher organ offers them all independently on both. This may be another influence from Kimball, whose organs offered up a large battery of traps and options in a similar manner, even in some of their more modest-sized instruments. Having said that, most of Wurlitzer's larger standard models incorporated this toggle switch, while the separation of the traps onto both 1st and 2nd Touch tabs was a feature found only their most deluxe models, such as the Fox Special.

The Fisher organ distinguished itself as one of the two largest Wurlitzers to have no high-pressure (more than 15" wind pressure) ranks. The other was 4/34 the RKO Roxy (Centre) Theatre, New York City, in 1932. Furthermore, the instrument was the eighth largest organ ever built for a theatre by the Wurlitzer company, behind only Radio City Music Hall, the five Fox Specials and the NYC Centre Theatre, the latter only being considered larger by the number of pipes, but having an identical number of ranks as the Fisher organ.

Stuart Barrie was organist at the famed Ambassador Theatre in St. Louis, Missouri. There must have been something special in his playing that got the attention of the Stanley Theatres firm, as he designed three identical 3/27 Wurlitzer organs for as many of their larger East Coast venues; the first being in 1927. Perhaps the most unusual feature in those organs was the fact that there were three manuals in a standard Style 285/four-manual shell, allowing for many more stop tablets on those three manuals. Among the other

unusual features on each of these organs was a Quintadena and matching celeste, a rather unusual but not completely unheard-of pairing up to that point. Normally, this stop, having a very strong harmonic content, only appeared at unison pitch, even on the largest Wurlitzers, who was, by the way, the only firm to ever consider pairing these chunky metal flutes. The first is believed to have appeared eleven years before the Fisher organ in the famed Denver Auditorium Wurlitzer, and at least once more, in the unusual specification of the Fabian Theatre in Paterson, New Jersey in 1928. Oddly, the 1926 Ambassador Theatre spec did not include a pair. While Barrie's name has never been connected with the Fisher Wurlitzer; given his penchant for those Quintadena Celestes, and given that his rather progressive design for the Ambassador organ incorporated a similarly shortened Fox box console two years earlier than the Fisher (with the same number of tabs for twenty-three ranks as the Fisher's thirty-four), his possible involvement or at least influence cannot be completely discounted.

By 1930, Robert Pier Elliot had been through the employment mill, having worked in various capacities for such venerable pipe organ firms as Hutchings, Austin, Skinner, Kimball, Aeolian and Welte. With the advent of talking pictures, Wurlitzer was scrambling to find a way to replace their cratering theatre organ sales. In a desperate attempt to make a transition to church organs and the onset of the Great Depression, Wurlitzer hired Elliot, hoping he could work his sales and marketing magic with them as he had done previously with Aeolian and Welte, but by then, the firm had established itself so well as a builder of pipe organs for silent film accompaniment, it could not get a foothold in the church market. By the mid-30s, Wurlitzer sales plummeted from an annual production height of over 300 instruments in 1926 to a low of a half-dozen per year, most of which were recycled from repossessed instruments in some manner. In a way, they had done themselves in by thumbing their noses at the church market. While other companies, like Kimball and Moller had long established themselves as builders of church organs prior to their entry into the theatre organ market, Wurlitzer had not. They were instead builders of orchestral instruments and band organs, and had they not stumbled upon the opportunity to pick up the as-

sets of the failing Hope-Jones Company and its esteemed founder in the early Teens, they might well have not been the dominant force they came to be, with well over one-third of all theatre organ production.

If you look at the original specifications of the remaining original Wurlitzer installations in Detroit churches, like St. Charles Borromeo in West Village, or Gesu Church, near McNichols and Livernois, you would see that their notions of what made up a church organ were somewhat limited and rather narrow-minded, even for their time. No flute choruses, no diapason choruses, no mixtures and few of the other stops that are proprietary to even the most basic church organ. Save for a few minor differences, Wurlitzer church organs were basically theatre organs without the traps and percussions. Nonetheless, there were some occasional, although minor tonal differences. One could often find an Aeoline, a softer variation on the Salicional stop or a Cornopean, a slightly smaller Trumpet, made of lead amongst garden variety theatre stops, but aside from the biggest custom jobs, there wasn't a hill of beans of difference from what was down the street at the Bijou. As a business, Wurlitzer was by no means stupid, and appear to have approached business in the most conservative manner. They didn't branch out into areas where they were fuzzy on the details, or uncertain of success, and it doesn't take much business know-how to speculate that they were making so much money on the theatre organs so quickly, the time it took to develop church instruments seemed considerably less desirable and definitely less profitable. Tonally, church pipe organs were already beginning to change, and the shifting philosophies of the so-called Organ Reform Movement were big and surprisingly swift once they finally gained traction in the Thirties. Some venerable old firms who had been producing pipe organs for decades were slow or completely resistant to conform to the "new" thinking, and ultimately died in the resulting wake. It was inevitable. If you add to that the emergence of electronic organs as early as the mid-30s, you have the first ingredients for the Perfect Storm. The Second World War put an end to a number of pipe organ manufacturers whose participants either never came back, or after the war, completely focused on the manufacture of electronic organs, like Wurlitzer, who

wisely never did get into the church market again. The possible exception to this might be their infamous amplified electrostatic reed organs, which again were neither fish-nor-fowl tonally, and certainly never measured up to their pipe organs in any way. As to Wurlitzer's production of church instruments, the evidence speaks for itself. While several Wurlitzer theatre organs were either resold or donated to churches who could not afford new, the detailed list in Judd Walton's book says it all: out of 2,238 instruments produced by the North Tonawanda, New York firm, only 256 were sold directly to churches, and of those, only 135 were designed as their brand of church organs.

Now we come to the organist most closely identified with the Fisher Wurlitzer. We can only surmise that Don Miller got the plum job at the Fisher simply because the Fishers or someone representing them had the good sense to pluck him off the bench from either the State or the Capitol theatres by simply offering him a better deal. Good quality recordings by organ buffs made late in Miller's life reveal a man who still displayed extraordinary technique and introspective creative gifts in the late 1960s. Still, when first presented to him, the Fisher Wurlitzer posed a serious challenge, as he was once paraphrased by student Fr. Jim Miller as having said it took him an entire year to figure out what to do with it. Not only did he figure out what to do with it, but Don Miller was heard on WJR radio broadcasts on Friday evenings, coast-to-coast in the 1950s. At that time, WJR760 was a 50,000 watt clear channel station, meaning that no other stations could broadcast on that bandwidth from sunset to sunrise, and that meant Don Miller and the Fisher Wurlitzer could be easily heard in most of the U.S. and Canada.

Finally, a tip of the hat to the Fisher brothers themselves: Frederick John, Charles Thomas, Lawrence Peter, William Andrew, Edward F., Alfred J. and Howard A. for their collective intellect, business acumen and brilliant vision of what was, but moreover, what might have been. Without it, these words would not have been written, and it's possible, in fact, quite likely that none of us would have ever met. There were, by the way, four Fisher sisters in addition to the seven brothers.

So now that we've had our somewhat specula-

tive history lesson, what have we all learned? If you said that we've learned that the Fisher Wurlitzer always was a unique theatre organ first and foremost, a concert organ a rather distant second, and a church organ a very distant third, you'd be right. If you said that we've learned that the Fisher Wurlitzer was a modified standard model with a custom console and lots of deluxe goodies added, you'd also be right. Having said all of that, it's clear that the added stops and custom specification, while making it neither a church organ nor even the claimed concert organ, did add substantially to the versatility and usefulness of the instrument, and unwittingly set the stage for a chain of events to make it arguably the most famous concertizing theatre organ ever.

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The Art of Organ-Building, 1905,
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"Motor City Marquees," 1994, Stuart
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AT THE SENATE THEATER

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June 12—John Lauter

July (TBA) - Open Console

September 11—Members Concert

October 9—David Wickerham

November 20—Tony O'Brien

December 11—Dave Calendine