



# Detroit Theater Organ Society

September 2011 Newsletter

Volume 50, Issue 8

## MEMBERS CONCERT

Lance Luce  
DTOS Board of Directors

The members concert is an opportunity for some of our playing members to share their talents with others in a relaxed, informal atmosphere. Each year anywhere between 4 and 6 people have volunteered to take a turn on our mighty Wurlitzer. This gives our members a chance to play the organ for an audience and play as much or as little as they feel comfortable with. It also give the listeners a wide variety of musical styles to listen to. My first experience playing our organ for anybody other than my family was at a members concert in 1974. So have some fun, come and play us a song or two, or just come and listen!

## FROM THE PRESIDENT

Dick Leichtamer  
President, DTOS Board of Directors

As the days begin to get shorter and the nights a little cooler, our thoughts turn to fall. It has been quite a hot summer in the Detroit area. It was also hot at the Senate theater. If you have been following the Newsletters, you know that much work has taken place, both inside the theater and on the outside of the theater. Many people have worked very hard, and the theater looks great. There are still many things that need done. This takes money and elbow grease, as they used to say.

If you have either the time or money (or both) please write out a check for a donation to DTOS and come down to the theater and put in some time working on the many things that still need to be done. We need you. Donations are tax-deductible. Please call Connie Masserant at 734-379-6645 for the work schedule.

**2012 CONCERT ARTISTS BEING CHOSEN**  
The 2012 concert series is beginning to be formulated and scheduled. If you have a favorite artist you would like to hear please contact Dick Leichtamer at [tibiaplana434@buckeye-express.com](mailto:tibiaplana434@buckeye-express.com) in the next two weeks. I won't guarantee that your choice will be used this year, but I put all the suggestions on a list to draw from. Artists are chosen by cost, type of program they play, and availability. The committee appreciates your input. You can also contact:

- ◆ Gil Francis at [ggf@juno.com](mailto:ggf@juno.com)
- ◆ Lance Luce at [lanceluce@wowway.com](mailto:lanceluce@wowway.com)
- ◆ Don Jenks at [djenks1814@att.net](mailto:djenks1814@att.net)
- ◆ Jeff Cushing at [jeffarb@ix.netcom.com](mailto:jeffarb@ix.netcom.com).

Thank you!

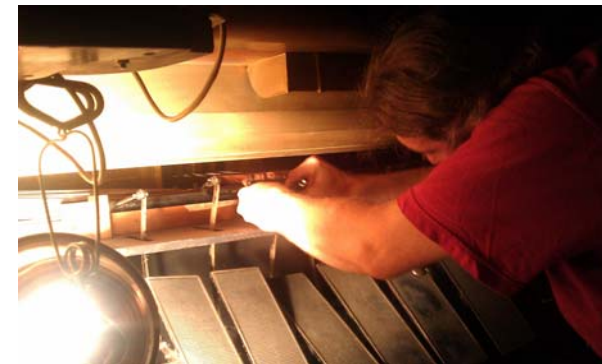
## RENOVATIONS UPDATE

Connie Masserant  
Restoration Extraordinaire

This month has been devoted mainly to the stage expansion and completion.



An extra 8' was added to the front of the stage to allow for more floor space. While the stage was being framed in, volunteers began working on pre-



paring the Wurlitzer for her move and the platform on which she would be placed.

Stephen Warner partially disconnected the pedal board from the console so as to more easily facilitate the move.



.....and keep on smilin'.

As work continued on the stage, several members rushed to store the seats under the stage that were taken up from the auditorium floor. It was no easy task, but easier since the floor had not been laid yet.



Now that the floor was almost completed, it was time to move the Wurlitzer so the balance of the floor could be put into place.



Before we could move her, the platform had to be moved to the stage area.....which had to be carried by several men. After all, it had to support almost 1600 pounds!



Once in place, professional movers from Evola Music, along with several members moved her up to the new level and onto the platform.



A special Thank You goes out to Dr. Paul Ovares and Dick Dengate who painted our stage. There are still a few finishing touches that need to be done before we can call it completed. But, we are well on our way.



Now that we have a much larger stage with the piano and console being mobilized, we will be able to expand our theater offerings and bring in much needed revenue through rentals.

A big Thank You goes out to our carpenters who donated their time and effort and to all of the volunteers who have made this project possible.

## UPCOMING EVENTS AT THE REDFORD THEATRE

September 9 & 10—The Treasure of Sierra Madre

September 23 & 24—National Velvet

September 30 & October 1 —Second Annual Classic Animation Festival

October 7 & 8—Three Stooges Festival

October 21 & 22—Munster, Go Home

October 29 8:00 p.m. ONLY —The Hunchback of Notre Dame (silent film with live accompaniment by Dave Calendine on the Barton Theatre Pipe Organ)

All of these great films are shown Friday and Saturday evenings at 8:00 p.m. as well as Saturday afternoon at 2:00 p.m. (unless otherwise noted)

Organ overtures start thirty minutes prior to each show time.

Sit back and enjoy the movies under the Redford's star-lit sky!

Visit the Redford Theatre on the web at [www.redfordtheatre.com](http://www.redfordtheatre.com)

Interested in getting the Newsletter electronically?  
Doing so helps the society save on printing and mailing costs.

Notify Dave Calendine at [dave@calendine.net](mailto:dave@calendine.net)

## FROM THE BENCH

Scott Smith

What It's Really All About

Like churches of all persuasions, I fear that the theatre organ community as a whole is desperately trying to attract young people at the expense of potential middle-aged and senior members. A few years back, the American Theatre Organ Society conducted a survey, and the results were nothing short of what you'd expect. Most members were in the middle-aged and senior category, and below the age of forty, it drops off dramatically. Don't get me wrong. I don't think we should stop trying to attract young people. Quite the contrary. But I do think we should concentrate more efforts on the expectations and desires of those who already support the theatre organ, instead of focusing all of our energy on youth who can ill afford to provide equal support at the moment. Let's play to our strengths. Please don't misunderstand, but for many years, the theatre organ community did precious little to attract or keep young people. In fact, they generally did everything they could to keep "the kids" out. Thankfully, things have changed. I hope it's not too little, too

late.

Over a period of years, I wrote frequently for the Journal of the American Theatre Organ Society, and in one of my pieces, I wrote about the subject of why young people are not as "involved" as older types. I built my case based on both empirical information and facts gleaned from arts seminars and various books and publications. In the first place, young people are busy building their lives, buying big-ticket items like their first houses and cars, establishing careers, getting married, having children and so on. They have little time to devote as volunteers for any of their various interests. While it was still commonplace to have "traditional" single-income families in the Sixties and Seventies, the norm of today's family is that with double incomes. Secondly, and just as important, people are simply not joining much of anything these days for all kinds of reasons. That includes churches, fraternal organizations and membership-based groups of any type. There appears to be no single reason for this, although computer-based social media appears to be taking the lead. In any case, it is a growing trend, and it really puts the squeeze on everyone, not knowing where finances are going, especially during difficult times.

It is at times such as these when the discussion reaches the artistic content of the programming. It's just like the churches: when attendance is low, surely it must be the music. That brings to mind some previous attempts at diversifying our own programming. I've been around the club long enough to remember the rather lightly attended "jazz" program during one of the Kool Jazz Festivals and the financially disastrous Juice Newton country-western concert that took place at the Senate, both in the late 80s. O.K., we tried. I'm not saying we shouldn't mix the organ with other types of musical media or performance art. Not at all. I am a greater advocate of this notion than most anyone you'd ever meet, but let's be sensible about it. Some things are a natural mix, others are oil and water. Again, let's play to our strengths.

Every once in a while, a notion rears its ugly head that we need to start playing rock-and-roll on our beloved theatre organs. I'll get behind this notion once they are respected as organs, and when the rockers start including the organs in their performances and recordings. A few years back, I watched a televised

awards show being broadcast live from Radio City Music Hall. Imagine my delight when I heard the unmistakable sounds of the big Wurlitzer. Imagine my shock when I saw how the twin consoles were being played. On one console was the irrepressible Paul Schafer, bandleader and arranger for David Letterman. On the other console was the lovely and talented Carole King, well-known pop/rock vocalist and composer. With the pedalboards and benches both removed, the two were being shot from overhead cameras. Apparently, no one knows what a pedalboard is anymore, nor how to play a keyboard sitting down. When you see Hammond organs being used in a group situation by modern performers, take note of the absence of the pedalboard in most cases, be the music rock, pop, country, blues or even contemporary Christian. I'll grant that the bass is more often than not played by a bass guitar, and the confusion of a competing bass line would not be pleasant, but the problem is that the organ is in danger of losing an important part of what makes it an organ. This is reminiscent of a bad relationship, where one party promises to "change" what's natural to them in order to retain that relationship, and have, in effect, lost what makes them who they are.

Perhaps the greatest challenge that exists is that most people have preconceived notions about, well...everything and it's just about impossible to get them to change those notions once the cement hardens. I'm probably not telling you anything when I say that most people associate the organ with church services, funerals, weddings and other sad occasions (just kidding...sort of). Look around. We've progressively become a much more casual society, and it's reflected in what we see at the organ concerts. When I first started attending theatre organ and other types of concerts in my teens about forty years ago, men wore neckties and ladies wore fancy dresses. It was unthinkable to dress otherwise. On special occasions at the club, especially during one of the long-gone-but-very-memorable Christmas programs, some of the men wore tuxedos and the ladies even wore floor-length formal gowns. It was a sight to behold, and as a result, you knew something special was happening. Today, almost no one wears a tie, thanks to the relaxed standards of the corporate world and "Casual Friday." It's a changing world, and working within the built-in parameters of the in-

## FROM THE BENCH ... *continued from previous page*

strument, it's hard for us to change and get beyond those preconceived notions.

It's ironic that most of the people I've encountered who fancy themselves to be good business men and women are also the very ones who seem to think they can snap their fingers or whisper in our ears and we'll suddenly be able to perform an entirely different concert to their liking on a moment's notice. They fail to recognize that this is also a business for the organists, that we require as much preparation to perform a piece as they would research and development for a product or sales technique. Learning, memorizing, arranging, registering and developing a piece of music is no different. It all takes an investment of time, and involves a certain amount of risk; hoping that audiences universally will be receptive to our chosen works. The late, great organist John Seng once told me that after taking that all into account, he figured the organists made about fifty cents an hour. With inflation, that's probably up to a buck by now. The point is, like anything else, it takes time to do it well.

Some of these business types have carried "production" of concerts to a new extreme. There was the case of one individual who was notorious amongst the organists for being a major control freak. His semi-private venue was not large, so the organists were required to play two and sometimes three concerts. One notable organist I know said that the morning after his evening concert, this individual unceremoniously tossed a notepad and a pen in front of him at the breakfast table. "Fewer transcriptions! More Irving Berlin!" was his stern and unwavering stance. On another occasion, this same individual (and by the way: not a player) was with another well-known organist at a much larger venue, and during the organist's practice time, decided he didn't like the registration, so he climbed up onto the lift platform and began re-registering to his own liking! The organist, being no shrinking violet, got into a hand-swatting contest with the man and nearly ended up in a fistfight. The organist let the man know in no uncertain terms that he had nothing to say about the artistic content of his program. Methinks this is proof that organists need to be equipped with tasers.

In terms of audience acceptance of anything, the question is not so much about what we're playing for them, but how to get them to the door. Does anyone really think we're going to get a significant change in audience attendance by announcing a concert devoted to the music of the Rolling Stones played on a 1920s theatre organ any more than one devoted to the Ring Cycle of Wagner? Assuming we actually did produce concerts of these types, it would take a great deal of commitment to promotion and production as well as who's-going-to-play-the-music. Do we stop with the music, or do we put on fancy light shows with fireworks and all the trimmings?

Young performers in any creative medium seem to devote a great deal of time trying to prove themselves. They generally have lots of time and gobs of energy to expend on their chosen craft. Young organists usually dwell on learning difficult works or boldly putting together something entirely new and different. When I was barely twenty, I was hot on performing newly composed works in theatre organ concerts in addition to the standard fare. I tried selling the notion, which I called "Contemporary Theatre Organ" to anyone who would let me perform it. Even though we were supposed to be "enlightened" in the Seventies, I wasn't very successful. My concept show contained (what I thought was) some of the best of the current pop genre, including a suite of music from "Jesus Christ, Superstar," which I still regard as Andrew Lloyd Webber's best work. However, my concept and I collided head-on with a powerful force from Detroit who felt I had fallen off the beam entirely, and was going in the wrong direction musically. No matter how hard I tried to explain or justify my cause, I was unsuccessful in getting her to budge philosophically. She seemed to think that what I was doing was treasonous, and from then on, reminded me what a horrible thing I was doing to the theatre organ every time she had the chance, even long after I had abandoned the concept. Luckily for me, while still in the midst of promoting this crazy idea, I performed for the first time at the club and was lauded for my efforts. I wasn't the only one trying to inject at least a little modern music into concerts at that time. Shortly

after I gave up my cause, Rob Richards created his "Fusion" concept, which attempted to blend music recorded and played back through a Yamaha synthesizer along with a theatre organ and a rhythm track. I thought his arrangements were tasteful and easy to take. He never tried to ram it down anyone's throat, but he was not much more successful than I was. At least we tried. I think as we mature, we realize at some point that we prove ourselves simply by being ourselves.

Virtually all of the best organists I've ever met have rather eclectic tastes in music, and that is reflected in what is played at the concerts...but...they need to be cognizant of the wants of their audience. It's great when we can incorporate some new piece of music from film or something of the latest pop music genre here and there, but if we suddenly start playing whole concerts of music of that type, I can tell you how our base audiences will react: negatively. Again I say: who among us is going to suddenly start playing a lot of this type of music? I think the best barometer for what the general public wants to hear is what is played at the remaining pizza restaurants. Guided by the imaginations and presumable good taste of those organists, the instrument is frequently challenged but never taken to a point where it cannot deliver, and that is an important distinction.

It is at times like this when we have to ask ourselves: what makes a good organist? My definition is that of someone who not only can play the notes correctly, but competently demonstrate that he/she understands the parameters of the instrument, and most importantly, one who, regardless of stylistic differences, places himself at the center of the music and lets it flow through them. When you think about it, musical arrangements are opinions of how a piece of music should be played, and we know that the most well-reasoned and insightful opinions are developed and weighed over time. While any one of us may eject a kneejerk opinion from time to time, those opinions, like musical arrangements may not be what we really wanted to say.

The best concerts, like the best meals, are well-thought-out, balanced and prepared with great detail. The cook, like the organist, can walk away at the end with a sense of pride and accomplishment. Few people

may realize it, but the best organists find time in their schedules to prepare a concert, even record it onto CD, and use it for a year while they travel around the country, or even the world. While some openly criticize organists for using their concerts as "CD machines," the truth is that, without a certain amount of sales of those CDs, most of those organists would not be able to continue to make even a basic living. There's a lot of financial risk involved in the making of a CD, and the return on that investment can be slow. Verrrrrrrrrry slow.

When the stars are in the proper alignment, and the wind is blowing in the right direction, the organ's keys become an extension of the organist's fingers. They are like a well-matched bow to a stringed instrument, a proper reed in a woodwind, or the right mallet in a percussionist's hands. They are a means to an end. As performing artists, we are not human jukeboxes, nor is what we do all about entertainment value, either. When an artist expresses themselves in public, they're opening themselves up for anyone to view into their psyche, their emotional and intellectual selves, and their very souls. That person you see up on stage; the one seated at the console. For the moment, forget about them. Instead, open up your ears and your minds and soak their message in. You'll be surprised at what you learn. Of all musicians, organists reveal more about themselves through their music than any other. Artistically, we cannot choose to be a certain type of organist any more than we can choose the color of our eyes. We cannot be anyone but ourselves.

As we guide the Detroit Theatre Organ Society and our Mighty Wurlitzer into the next phase of their existence, we will be frequently challenged and periodically conflicted as to what to do and how to proceed. In those times, let us remember to boldly move forward with this brief but powerful thought. Whether the questions are tough or easy, the answer must always remain the same:

*It's all about the music.*



photo: Lance Luce

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Senate Theater

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2011 Concert Series

SENATE THEATER

September 11—Members Concert

October 9—David Wickerham

November 20—Tony O'Brien

December 11—Dave Calendine