

# Detroit Theater Organ Society

November 2011 Newsletter

Volume 50, Issue 10

## TONY O'BRIEN AT THE WURLITZER

Sunday, November 20, 2011—3:00 P.M.  
Senate Theater, Detroit MI

This month's concert at the Senate brings back popular Detroit organist Tony O'Brien in a program he is calling "Symphonic Pops!"

In a concert unlike any he has performed at the Senate Theatre before, Tony has longed to present a program which features a range of music not typically heard on the Wurlitzer. He says: "This wonderful instrument, in addition to being an historic link to Detroit's Movie Palace era, is one-of-a-kind and presents a rare opportunity to play some classic and orchestral music, not often heard on a theatre pipe organ."

Highlights include:

- Orchestral Suite from the **STAR WARS Trilogy**, including "**The Empire Strikes Back**" by John Williams
- **The Magnificent Seven** by Elmer Bernstein
- Suite from Lerner & Loewe's "**CAMELOT**"
- **A.D. 1620** (The Mayflower) by Edward MacDowell
- "**Sicilienne**" by Gabriel Fauré
- "**Roulade**" by Seth Bingham
- **Prelude & Fugue in B Minor** (The Great) by Johann Sebastian Bach
- **Allegro Cantabile** (5th Symphony)
- **FINALE** (6th Symphony) Charles M. Widor
- The full score of "**Slaughter on Tenth Avenue**" by Richard Rodgers
- The Ragtime works of Scott Joplin
- and much more!

Tony O'Brien is a dynamic musician with a spirited approach to the keyboard. His artistry embraces both the classical and popular repertoires, attracting a

large and widely diverse audience. Having begun serious study in piano and organ at age seven, he was already an accomplished church organist by age ten!



## TONY O'BRIEN ... (continued from first page)

At 16, Tony played his first concert tour on the East coast including the New England islands Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, with concerts on many notable organs, including the historic Bruton Parish Church in Williamsburg, Virginia, and the Atlantic City Convention Hall. After a performance at the historic Union Chapel on Martha's Vineyard, Dr. Harold Heeremans, National Dean of the American Guild of Organists wrote: "Tony O'Brien will make his mark! He has the equipment, both technical and musical."

He was subsequently awarded a full "Friends of Music" scholarship to Wayne State University, where he studied organ performance with Ray Ferguson and Malcolm Johns, as well as master classes at the University of Michigan with Robert Glasgow and Marilyn Mason. Tony continued his studies in organ and the art of improvisation with Dr. Frederick L. Marriott, and with Argentinean organ virtuoso Héctor Olivera.

Tony has concertized throughout the United States and Canada for many chapters of the American Guild of Organists, the Royal Canadian College of Organists, and the American Theatre Organ Society, and has been a featured performer at their national conventions. He has also performed with numerous ensembles including the Oakway Symphony Orchestra, the Detroit Concert Band under Leonard B. Smith, the Southern Great Lakes Symphony, and the Lawton, Oklahoma Philharmonic.

His talents are also showcased in benefit fundraisers for such groups as Save the Children & Habitat for Humanity.

Tony was chosen to give four concerts at the "National Showcase of Performing Arts for Young People", sponsored by the American Theater Society, which brought the organ to a large and mostly new audience, and they were completely enthralled. Other notable concerts include The War Memorial, Trenton, New Jersey; Casa Loma in Toronto and the New York State Fairgrounds. He performed to sell-outs at the famous outdoor amphitheater of the Chautauqua Institution in New York, including two curtain calls, and at the historic Gray's Armory in Cleveland, Ohio. Mr. Bob Jackson, concert critic wrote in the Western Reserve Relay: "*Tony O'Brien unbelievably fantastic! Young organist captures the heart and thrills the imagination of the audience!*"

His coast-to-coast tour of Australia included appearances at the great Sydney Town Hall and the magnificent Sydney Opera House.

Upcoming concerts include the New Orleans Symphony, San Diego's Balboa Park, the Swiss Organ Festival in Zurich, and the famous Cathedral of Saint-Sulpice in Paris.

Come to the Senate Theater and hear the incredible artistry of Tony O'Brien! It will be a concert you will not forget!

## UPCOMING EVENTS AT THE REDFORD THEATRE

November 18 & 19—Fiddler on the Roof

December 2 & 3—The Miracle on 34th Street

December 10 8:00 p.m. ONLY —Walt Strony in concert on the Barton Theatre Pipe Organ, also featuring the Laurel & Hardy silent film, "Big Business"

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)

# RENOVATION UPDATE

Connie Masserant  
DTOS Board of Directors

The latest in bringing our theater back to life is giving her steps and stairwells a face lift.

First, all of the peeling paint and plaster needed to be scraped off and removed.



Thanks Father Andrew and Dick Leichtamer for taking the first “step” in getting those steps ready for the first coat of paint.

At Saturday’s work session, Gil Francis saved the day. He showed up to help with the scraping of paint and removing plaster in the stairwell. The next step is adding plaster and sanding before we paint.

Speaking of painting, the front facing of the

stage needs to be painted as well as the stairs and stairwells. Any takers?

We are still in need of volunteers. There are yet many jobs that need to be completed.

Every Saturday is a work session. We start at 10:00 a.m. Please come and donate a couple of hours of your time. It can be very rewarding, not to mention all the fun we have.

If you want to confirm that we are working a particular Saturday, give me a call.

Connie Masserant  
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# NOTES FROM THE EDITOR

Dave Calendine

Many things are still happening at the Senate Theater. Walls are being scraped and painted, the new stage still has work being done on it, our prized organ is still getting much-needed work done on it by our skilled organ crew, and many other projects are happening behind the scenes.

Work days are still happening most Saturdays at the Senate. If you get any spare time and could help out with sprucing up our home, please consider stopping in and helping out. There are jobs for all skill levels, and Connie Masserant will be more than happy to help you get started on one of the many projects that need done.

Your board of directors have been working hard on several projects, and you are more than welcome to come to any of the board meetings to see what all is happening behind the scenes of the Detroit Theater Organ Society.

Shortly after Tony O’Brien’s concert, it will be

time to decorate the Senate Theater for Christmas. There are many decorations to be placed throughout the theater, and any help would be appreciated. If you would like to help with the “greening” of the theater, please let me know at Dave@Calendine.net.

Congratulations to Fr. Andrew Miller who has been asked for the fourth time to be a part of a very large musical conference in Japan. The conference is called “The Foundation for Global Harmony” and includes several other musicians. In the past he has performed solos, duets with violinists and vocalists, as well as performed with orchestras. Please be sure to congratulate him on this huge honor.

On behalf of the entire Board of Directors of the Detroit Theater Organ Society, I would like to wish you a **Happy Thanksgiving!**

Thanks for being a part of the Detroit Theater Organ Society! See you at the Senate!

Please consider helping the society save money each month by electing to receive this Newsletter electronically. The savings on paper, printing, and mailing are quite significant. It is quick and simple to sign up. Just send an e-mail to: **Dave@Calendine.net** and ask for your Newsletter to be sent to you each month in your e-mail.



# FROM THE BENCH

Scott Smith  
The Modern Organ, Part II

The one family of tone that seems to have diminished somewhat in its contribution to the overall scope of the theatre organ is that of the foundations, or the diapason family. Back in the early days of development, the author tends to think that builders still felt the need to pass off their new creations as legitimate pipe organs, instead of breaking new ground. Beginning with instruments of about four ranks, we would commonly find a medium scaled set called the Open Diapason in Wurlitzer organs, an example of which can be found in the Solo chamber of the Fisher organ. Kimball called it a Phonon Diapason, as I suspect they wanted to retain the connection with church/classical organs and did not want to be compared with "that" company in North Tonawanda. In nearly every instrument of fifteen or so ranks, there would be a larger scale set, called the Diaphonic Diapason (which can be found in the Foundation chamber) that would take the place of the Open, and would be complemented by a smaller scaled Horn Diapason (Orchestral chamber), which other builders might have logically called a Viola. Their harmonic structure tended to be brighter, yet softer in tone, and can be used in conjunction with other flues that we would associate with accompanimental or "transparent tone" stops, such as the Concert Flute, Quintadena or Dulciana that could be easily colored by the lighter chorus reeds, such as the Clarinet or Oboe Horn, or the softer strings, like the Gambas or Salicionals. As Wurlitzer organs increased in size, the Open Diapason would reappear to complement the other two diapasons. Logically, competing builders followed suit in their own instruments. While there's no absolute documentation of which the author is aware, it appears that organbuilders of that time tended to incorporate a foundation/diapason stop as either a companion or a foil for Tibia stops with near-equal sonic power. The Open Diapasons complemented the standard scale Tibias, and the Diaphonics were matched up with the large-scale Tibias. Whether by design or happenstance, diapasons tend to act as "tremolo nullifiers," if you will. Note that when one is playing the Fisher organ in any

sized ensemble and the tibias are on at various pitches, the addition of any of the diapasons tend to mask the heavy rhythmic effect of the tibia tremolos, for better or worse. In fact, the prevailing philosophy of one rather prominent school of thought is that the Open and Diaphonic diapasons have no place in combinations on the Great manual for this very reason. Not everyone agrees, but it is safe to say that the role of the louder diapasons in the melody line has taken a back seat in today's thinking. However, one often sees the lighter Horn Diapason at 16', 8' and even 4' on the Great manuals of modern organs to provide subtle support for other voices without adding much in the way of fundamental tone.

A modern reconfiguration of the Fisher Wurlitzer might find things a little different with regard to the foundations. It's possible that the Diaphonic Diapason might be softened overall, or its role possibly be reduced, depending on the opinion of the particular tonal designer/finisher. If it were the latter, we might find it in the Pedal at 16' and 8' pitches and on the Solo at 8' for sure, but possibly not much of anyplace else. Depending on the size of the venue where the organ would be playing, its place on the Bombarde might be taken by the Open Diapason, not at all on the Accompaniment, and if it appeared at all on the Great, it could be used through a process called amplexing. What this does is to allow two or more ranks or stops to play from the same stop tablets. For example, in this case, the Diaphonic and Open diapasons could be played on an either/or basis via a single stop tab in "General" or "Control" section (a division somewhat new to modern theatre organs). Those familiar with Allen electronic organs will remember this same type of switching (Diapasons become Flutes, Strings become Dulcianas, Moonlight Becomes You, etc.). Dave Junchen's "Encyclopedia of the American Theatre Organ" states that the word "amplex" was created by organist John Seng, who utilized it effectively on the Mundelein Organ, particularly in the use of certain of the string ranks. However, the Geneva Organ Company in Geneva, Illi-

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

nois (western Chicago suburb) used this name on their consoles in the 1920s when creating different pitches, and the author has seen it with his own eyes. On the console of the 3/10 Geneva in the Deerpath Theatre in Lake Forest, Illinois, there were two of these tabs. The "Kinura Amplex" played what amounts to a major third above the note played, or basically a 6-2/5' Kinura. In like, the "String Amplex" played a major fifth above the note played, or a 5-1/3' Viole. The sounds derived from these stops were obviously for some sort of comic or "Oriental" effect. While relatively small in output, Geneva was a rather innovative, business-minded company who would build virtually anything for their customers and often did. The Mundelein Organ's original relay was built by Geneva, and we can only surmise that one or more of their amplex stops may have found their way onto the console, or that Seng ran into one or more surviving Geneva theatre organs in the Chicago area at some point and simply liked the name, modifying its useage for his own purposes. While he did not call it by that name, George Wright did much the same by amplexing large and standard scale tibia ranks via an A/B switch, enabling use of the same tabs on both his Pasadena and Hollywood studio organs. What does the word actually mean? No one seems to really know, but if we deconstruct the word "amplex," it seems to make the most sense that it was a combination of AM-plied or AM-plitude com-PLEX. While there is no definable prefix called "am-", the dictionary tells us that the suffix "-plex" means "having parts or units," usually defined by the initial element (duplex, quadraplex, etc.). It is a word you'll find almost exclusively on modern theatre organs, and has fallen quietly into our proprietary little lexicon.

Another good example of potential use of amplexing (also regarding diapasons) is regarding the famed 4/38 Wichita Wurlitzer, whose early life was spent in the New York Paramount Theatre. Just prior to installation into the Century II Convention Center, members of Wichita Theatre Organ were forewarned by New York types that the big 25" Diaphonic Diapason was not particularly useful in the manual portion and sounded more like a group of locomotive whistles, even within the spacious volume of the 3,500-seat theatre.

Taking that advice to heart, the WTO people installed a 15" Diaphonic Diapason in its place. Musically, it is undoubtedly more useful, but there are times when organists want that big 25" Diaphonic Diapason sound and can't get it any other way. Installing the original set to be used in this way has been discussed over the years, but to date, except for the 16' and 8' basses, the upper remainder of the rank lies in silent repose. To have the big Diaphonic available via an A/B switch would be useful, but we must recognize that additional pipes, chest, regulator and tremolo take up a large amount of real estate in the chambers for only an occasional use.

Having said all of that about the foundation stops, we need to recognize that theatre organs are generally not going into large buildings anymore, but if they did, those space-filling heavy foundations would go right back on the stoprail, or be opened back up to the hilt again. In truth, when we judge the volume of a theatre organ, it has more to do with the foundations and the tibias than anything else, aside from say, the loudest of reeds.

We need to remember that the unit orchestra was not attempting to emulate the symphony orchestra, but instead the theatre orchestra whose thin, incisive tone was designed to make athletic changes in the dynamics on a moment's notice. It took the most important sounds out of the orchestra and combined them with a band, creating a unique type of sound to support the new visual medium. I tend to think this simply "happened" and very quickly evolved based on need. Besides, a small orchestra obviously cost less than a large one, so why would theatre managers want to overpay the musicians when they could obviously overpay themselves?

In most cases, the size of the organ tended to reflect the size of the theatre, although we tend to pack more organ into chambers these days than we used to. There are several reasons for this. While we can only surmise that the Fisher Wurlitzer was paid for up front (because they could, and probably because it was just about the biggest custom instrument the company ever built), most of the organs were purchased on a monthly payment plan, and if the theatre owners failed to make

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

good on those payments, it was not unusual to see them repossessed. Yes, that's right. Just like a car. One can only imagine the frosty atmosphere when the organ crew came into a theatre to take possession of an unpaid organ, most probably accompanied by the sheriff. You couldn't just drive it away when the manager was in the bathroom. There were also legal issues that surrounded these repossessions that companies like Wurlitzer cleverly and cheaply managed to get around. They would first lay down a floor frame made of hardwood over the existing chamber floor that was pre-drilled and pre-marked in order to help the installers move more efficiently during installation. Components would be doweled and/or screwed into the frame with wooden cleats. Secondly, manufacturers created racking that resembled "towers," if you will, that were screwed into the chests to hold up large or heavy pipes, and specifically not down into the floor or into the walls. In the case of a repossession, the manufacturer could return and remove the organ complete, leaving only the floor frame and the swell shutters, as the law in most locations saw anything directly fastened to the building to be a part of it, but if a secondary piece were between the building and in this case, a pipe organ, so long as the frames were left undisturbed, the organ manufacturer was out rather little and operated within the law. In most cases, these organs would be recycled in part or whole into another theatre with - you guessed it - another floor frame. Since modern organ installations don't generally have to deal with issues of ownership or payment, "new" organs usually don't have floor frames, and some of that "tower" racking can be, and often is eliminated. That means more pipe organ can be crammed in than before, and generally is. I once heard an organ buff exclaim, "Put more organ into those chambers...it makes it sound better!" Maybe so, but sometimes difficult to service.

The design of the modern organ has changed a bit over time, but not as dramatically as one might think. Like its musical cousin, the church organ, many

changes in the direction of the modern theatre organ merely evolved out of need more than changing ideology. I can tell you from personal experience that amongst other things, the organist is surely helped a great deal by the inclusion of as many 4' string stops as possible. Often, that means extending string ranks up another octave with matching pipes. The din of the crowd can overwhelm even the largest of ensembles in a large room. About ten or so years ago, I played for the Domino's Pizza Olympics at the Michigan Theatre in Ann Arbor. There were several motor homes parked out on the street that had been modified as rolling transmitters, broadcasting the event live with a worldwide hookup. It was very exciting for me, whose job was simply to play while people entered, and what an animated crowd it was. By the time the Big Cahuna entered, the crowd was so rowdy, I could barely hear myself play, even with All Flags Flying (or Full Tilt Boogie, if you prefer). Thankfully, just a few years earlier, the Solo String had been added to the Great manual at 4', and with the Octave coupler engaged (another very useful latter-day addition), it was just enough supplemental clarity on top of full organ that helped me get through my part of the program. Even though the pipes stopped an octave below the top of the keyboard, it brought just enough extra clarity to help my somewhat desperate situation. I can only imagine what it must have been like for the organists back-in-the-day, when theatre organs often spoke behind thick velvet curtains, and most of those sorely lacking in terms of upperwork and couplers. An interesting sidelight is that the quest for additional clarity in modern theatre organs runs something of a parallel to that of modern church instruments, who pursue clarity in a somewhat different manner but seeking similar results. I suspect that at least part of the perceived need for added clarity in all cases is that we are generally deafer than previous generations, given all of the noise we experience on a daily basis. What was that, you say?

NEXT MONTH: PART III OF THE MODERN ORGAN



Photo: Lance Luce

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Look for us on Facebook!

### UPCOMING CONCERTS

December 11 — Dave Calendine  
March 18 — Scott Foppiano  
April 15 — Ken Double  
May 20 — Ron Rhode  
June 9 — Lance Luce  
September 16 — Pierre Fracalanza  
October 21 — Steven Warner  
November 18 — Melisa Ambrose-Eidson  
December 2 — Fr. Andrew Rogers

