



# DETROIT THEATER ORGAN SOCIETY

Volume 54, Issue 5

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DTOS  
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& Directors

## George Orbits

December 16, 1928 – April 21, 2015

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*The following was written by Lance Luce.*

George Orbits was the founder of the Detroit Theater Organ Club. He bought the Wurlitzer organ from the Fisher brothers when they were renovating the Fisher theater in 1960. There were other bids for the organ, some higher than George's, but the Fisher brothers liked the fact that George intended to keep the organ in the Detroit area, so they awarded him the sale. George began removing the organ himself and part way through this massive task he received help from some other local organ enthusiasts. Here is a little background in case

you're not familiar with this piece of history.

George's original intent was to install the organ in his new home. Until his home was built, George and a few theater organ buffs created The Detroit Theater Organ Club in 1961, and leased the old Iris Theater on East Grand Boulevard in Detroit where the organ was installed. The Club's popularity grew and the Iris Theater was soon outgrown, causing George and the DTOC to search for a permanent home for the Club and the organ. The derelict Senate Theater was found after a city wide search. Club members spent several thousand man hours over two

years restoring the building while the organ was being installed in four new chambers built on the old stage and in the two original organ chambers on either side of the stage. In 1989 the DTOC became The Detroit Theater Organ Society, an all volunteer non-profit organization. The DTOS and the preceding DTOC have been in existence for 55 years, far longer than the founding members had ever anticipated. The organ was purchased by the organization and this mighty Wurlitzer has now been playing longer in the Senate Theater than in its original home in the Fisher Theater.

Without George, there would have been no organ club, so we are all grateful to George for

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## George Orbits ... continued from front page

acquiring the organ, and then sharing it with all of us for so many years. George Orbits was a very generous man as well. He continued to donate his time and financial resources throughout the years to the club and organ that he loved so much. Without George's financial support in the past few decades, the club would not have been able to continue to operate. I was fortunate to get to work on some projects in the past 10 years or so along side George, and I know that he was not only smart and meticulous, but he wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. He was humble and always a gentleman. He was quiet and didn't want to be in the spotlight. His science and engineering background allowed him to think things through, and come up with solutions to many chal-

lenges. It was an honor to get to know George, he will missed but never forgotten. Here is an excerpt from the program from his memorial service. I though you might like to read it.

George was the son of Joseph A. and Beatrice D. Orbits. He was born in Detroit, Michigan on December 16, 1928. His father owned one of the first Ford dealerships in Michigan and sadly, died when George was 5 years of age. While his mother went to work as a Secretary, he was cared for by his Aunt Hattie. George graduated from Cass Tech High School and in 1956, graduated from the Technical Institute with a certification in Engineering and Television Repair.

George married Muriel Grohs in 1951 (deceased 1999). While stationed in

Portland, Maine with the Air National Guard, they welcomed their first child, a daughter, Elizabeth in 1952. They returned to Michigan and set up house in Dearborn Heights. In 1953, son David was born, followed by daughter Kathryn in 1959.

Upon discharge from the service, George joined Bendex Aerospace, where he worked on some of the first satellites. He later moved to Ann Arbor in 1965 building the home where he would live for the past 50 years. During this time, he worked for both the Environmental Research Institute of Michigan (ERIM) and the University of Michigan. In 1977, he joined Science Applications Incorporated, now known as SAIC, transferring to the Dayton, Ohio office where he worked (and commuted between Dayton and

Ann Arbor) for 18 years. During these years he cultivated a close working relationship with the United States Air Force at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, specializing in radar and optics. He retired in 1995.

George's passion was theater pipe organ music and in 1960 he rescued the 4-manual, 34-rank organ, known as the "mighty" Wurlitzer from the wrecking ball when the Fisher Theater underwent renovation. He was subsequently a founding member of the Detroit Theater Organ Club (1961) and until his death, played an active role in what is now known as the Detroit Theater Organ Society, his legacy in salvaging the Fischer Theater organ for future generations to enjoy.

Visit our friends at the Redford Theatre for their classic film series and organ concerts

May 29 & 30—Titanic

June 7—SILENT MOVIE! "Wings" accompanied live by Stephen Warner

June 12 & 13—Dial M for Murder" in 3D

June 26 & 27—The Goonies

July 10 & 11—Jurassic Park

July 17, 18 & 19—Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory

July 24 & 25—The Shawshank Redemption

July 26—Justin LaVoie in Concert on the Barton Theatre Organ

August 7 & 8—Mildred Pierce

August 15—Pulp Fiction

August 21 & 22—Forrest Gump

Full schedule of events, including times and prices, can be found on the web site

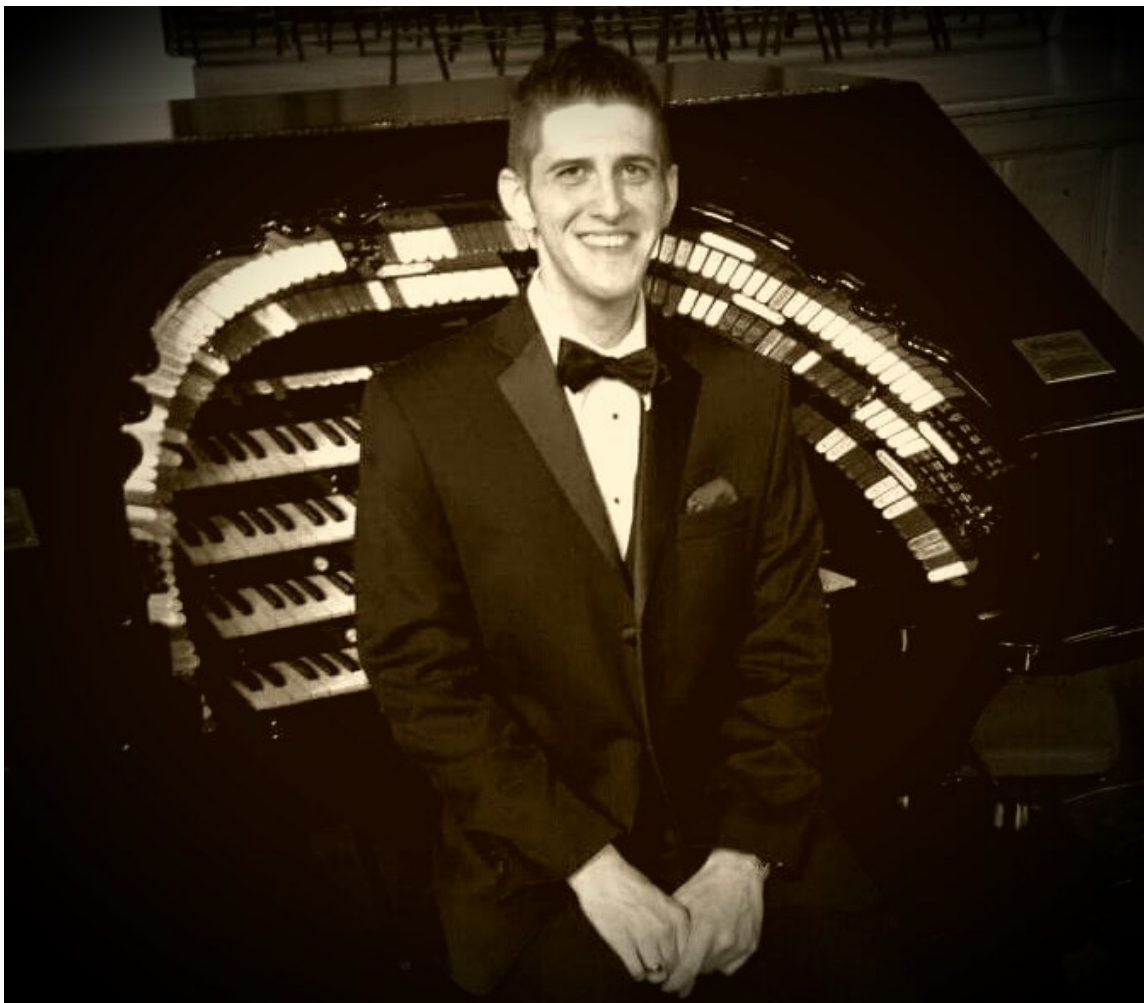
[WWW.REDFORDTHEATRE.COM](http://WWW.REDFORDTHEATRE.COM)

# David Rhodes Premieres at the Senate

Sunday, May 17  
3:00 p.m.

The Detroit Theater Organ Society is pleased to present a new artists to the Senate stage. David Rhodes is 30 years old and a native of Lisle, Illinois. He began piano lessons at age six and at age eleven started his formal organ training at Benedictine University under the instruction of Fr. John Palmer C.S.V., a student of Jean Langlais. Further studies were at Concordia University Chicago with a focus in Music Education and Organ Performance. David is now Organist at Shepherd of the Hill Lutheran Church ELCA in Lockport, Illinois.

Involvement with the Theatre Organ began at age fourteen when he began studies with Chicago theatre organist Lee Maloney, a student of Kay McAbee. David is House Organist at the Tivoli Theatre and has played



for a variety of programs at the Aragon Ballroom, Arcada, Coronado, Pickwick and Rialto Theatres as well as the Sanfilippo estate. He is also the President of the Chicago Area Theatre Organ Enthusiasts, the organiza-

tion that owns and maintains the Tivoli Wurlitzer. David is curator for the 4/21 Gottfried-Wurlitzer at the University of Saint Mary of the Lake, Mundelein Seminary. He is also the owner of City Organ Works,

LLC, a pipe organ restoration and maintenance company that specializes in both classical and theatre organs.

David's concert will take place at the Senate Theater on Sunday, May 17. The doors to the

theater will open at 2:00 p.m., with the concert starting at 3:00 p.m. Come enjoy an afternoon of theater pipe organ music on our Mighty Wurlitzer at the Senate Theater!

## Upcoming Movies at the Senate Theater

May 30—SILENT MOVIE! Buster Keaton's "Three Ages"  
accompanied live by John Lauter at the Mighty Wurlitzer theater pipe organ

June 13—Laurel and Hardy Festival—six Laurel and Hardy shorts,  
three "talkies" and three "silents"

accompanied live by Lance Luce at the Mighty Wurlitzer theater pipe organ

Visit [WWW.DTOS.ORG](http://WWW.DTOS.ORG) for our full schedule of events at the Senate Theater.



# Movies! Rentals! Special Events!

Michael J. Fisher  
DTOS Board of Directors

This spring we are excited to offer two opportunities to experience movies in a simpler time in the amazing setting of the historic Senate Theater. Grab a nice bag of popcorn and some Faygo soda pop and take in some great laughs with great comedic actors of long ago like Buster Keaton, Stan Laurel & Oliver Hardy.

May 30 at 8:00 p.m. come see Buster Keaton star in the 1923 silent film, "Three Ages." We are delighted to present this classic film accompanied with live music performed on our Wurlitzer by local artist John Lauter. Seeing a silent on the big screen with live organ music is a true step back in time. This movie predates our Fisher/Orbits organ and even the theater itself!

June 13 at 8:00 p.m., we feature our very own Lance Luce, who will provide musical accompaniment on the Mighty Wurlitzer to three silent comedy

shorts starring the genius of Laurel and Hardy and their antics. We will also screen three shorts or "talkies" that also feature Laurel and Hardy.

Both of these events are worth the trip to our theater. Come support our organization! Bring friends! Don't miss out! Tickets are \$10.00 at the door.

An exciting opportunity this year is the inclusion of the Senate Theatre in this year's annual film festival, Cinetopia. We will be presenting two movies as part of this multi-city, multi-venue event on Saturday, June 6. Doors open at 4:00 p.m. for a 5:00 p.m. showing of the documentary "Dark Star" and then followed with a 8:00 p.m. screening of the science fiction epic movie "Dune" (1984).

We are excited to take part in this film festival along with our sister theater, The Redford. The festival also takes place at the D. I. A., the Michigan and State Theatres in Ann Arbor, as

well as several other locations throughout the metro Detroit area.

Please Check out their website, [Cinetopiafestival.org](http://Cinetopiafestival.org), for further details, including a full schedule of movies, times and locations. This is a great opportunity for the Senate to get some recognition and further our "place on the map" as a theater and venue. We are excited to be included in this event and consider it somewhat of an honor to be selected by the film festival.

Tickets for this event will be \$12.00 at the door.

Our rental business continues to move forward ever so slightly. If you have any ideas or suggestions to increase rental business, please let us know. We have had several small events this year already, including two with the Matrix Theater Company of Detroit.

A local ballet company has rented our facility twice in re-

cent months for two great shows featuring local youth in a traditional Mexican dance show. They are fast pace, loud and lots of fun to watch and be part of. We are very happy to be making continued headway in our local community.

Our phones do ring with inquires and we do receive emails of interest. I continue to offer flexibility and great availability of our venue to help promote this important source of income and stability to our organization.

All events require volunteerism. It is great to have a "regular" crew, but we could sure use your help. We look to our membership to help at each event. We can use you, sitting or standing! Consider contacting me to come and be part at any of any event or movie. This is your club, come take part. It is fun!



Come see the Buster Keaton silent movie "Three Ages" at the Senate Theater  
Saturday, May 30 at 8:00 p.m.  
Accompanied LIVE on the Mighty Wurlitzer Theater Pipe Organ by John Lauter!

# A natomy of a Restoration

## Part 1: What is a Regulator? Scott Smith, Organ Restoration

Among the most important parts in any pipe organ is the regulator. Traditional church organs often have just one large regulator per division, sometimes the size of a small car. Conversely, theatre organs have many smaller regulators, generally never approaching the size of those in church organs. So what are they? What do they do? Why do we need them?

The term "regulator" and "reservoir" are virtually interchangeable, although there are those who will tell you that they perform a different function. Most tend to agree, however that it's more a case of semantics than something that can be defined and/or proven. To our modern ears, stability is key to the sound of the pipe organ, so that tones can remain rock-steady when tremolos are at rest. In the past, before winding became something of a science and electric blowers took the place of overworked human "lifters," the steadiness of those tones was not taken for granted. It often wobbled noticeably when notes were held or large chords were played. Today, there is a small, but stubborn group of people who prefer to hear their pipe organs perform as they did in the past, with temperaments other than equal, and intentional "unsteady wind" for a more historically accurate sound. Fortunately, those of us who appreciate the theatre organ don't have to worry about such things. It's not an issue for us. In fact, when you think of it, with so many tremolos running simultaneously, we prefer our wind to be predictably unsteady!

The maximum pressure produced by any blower is called

the "static" pressure. The dictionary defines "static" as something that is fixed, stationary, or showing little or no change. Because the demands placed upon the organ by an organist are not uniform throughout the organ at any given moment, a large regulator called the "static regulator" or "blower regulator" assists in the operation by steadying the wind coming directly out of the blower. The pressure is dropped every-so-slightly, so that the amount of air this regulator produces can be more-or-less predictable when entering the regulators for the various divisions, where the pressure is dropped a bit more. Why? So that even when the greatest possible demands placed on the regulator by the organist are happening, the tone is as rock steady as possible. This is all well and good for a church/classical organ, but a static regulator is the last thing you want in a theatre organ. Cases have been known where tremolos refuse to run, or, when they will actually run, they produce an erratic speed or are fluttery when a static reservoir has been introduced into the wind system of a theatre organ. I like to define a tremolo as a "tuned leak," which, when turned on, runs at a somewhat predictable and constant speed, while the music being played

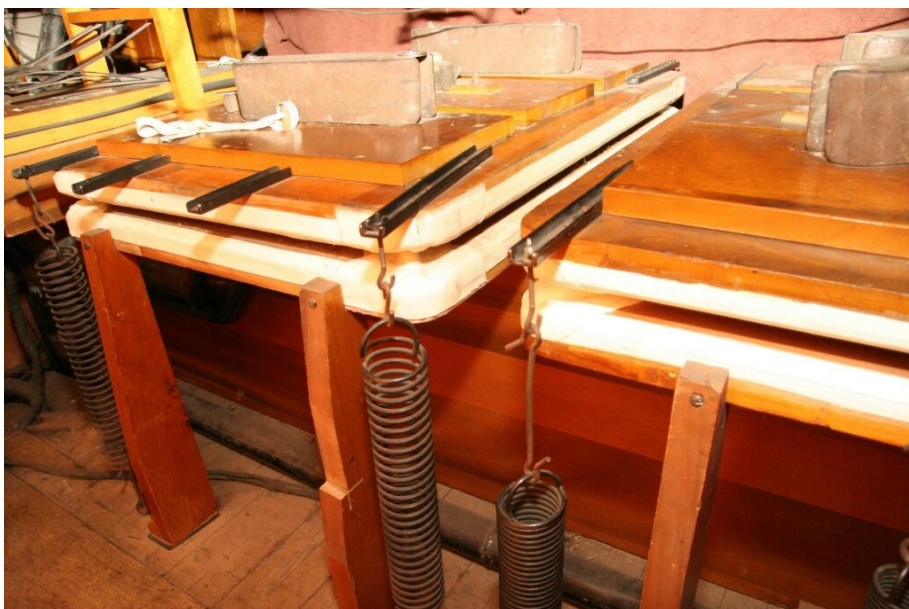
is anything but constant in terms of its demands of air. I suppose we could say that the ending result is "variably constant."

So how does it regulate the air? It's actually a rather clever and simple method, and for the purposes of this piece, we'll just address how it is done in a Wurlitzer organ. Static wind begins at the blower outlet and continues on its journey through the various larger wind lines delivering compressed air to the various wind trunks, where it essentially waits to enter a regulator. Through a series of three valves, static wind enters the bottom of the regulator, where it is immediately regulated down to a desired (and adjustable) pressure, determined chiefly by some large tension springs on the outside. The first valve looks like the planet Saturn, rings and all, if you could cut it in half at the equator. This is known as the "cone" or "ball" valve. A rod is inserted all the way through the cone beginning at the top (essentially the "North Pole"). The cone then sits atop a hefty spring at the bottom that acts as

a shock absorber. The other two valves are essentially trap doors that open and close via push-rods, driven by the top or "head" of the regulator, and open only when there is a need for more air. This is perhaps the smoothest and most efficient method ever devised to introduce static air into a regulator. Suffice it to say, this determines the wind pressure that is shared by the chest(s) to which the regulator is connected.

When on a chamber tour, at least some regulators can be seen from the walkway. They are covered in strips and patches of white deerhide at the hinge points, and you'll notice that they tend to resemble a suitcase in some ways. In fact, some descriptive terms are shared by both; those being the expanding sides, called the "ribs," and the "gussets" in the corners.

Beginning next month, we will cover the restoration, and in this particular case, the re-engineering of a surplus Wurlitzer regulator for a very specific purpose in the Fisher Wurlitzer. Stay tuned!



# The Story of the Mighty Fisher/Orbits Wurlitzer

*Editor's Note: The following article was submitted by Gil Francis for inclusion in the Newsletter.*

*The article was originally published in the "Detroit Theater Organ Club News" on July 29, 1962, then again on December 15, 1970. It is included here in memory of our founder, George Orbits.*

*From December 15, 1970*

## TENTH ANNIVERSARY

The year 1971 will be the tenth anniversary of the club. It will also be the year in which the DTOC makes the final payment to Mr. George Orbits on the organ. To George and to the charter members of the club the word "Thanks" does not adequately express our feelings for the great gift given to us by their vision and monumental effort.

Many members are not aware of how the club was founded. In order to refresh the memory of all members, the following article is reprinted from the third issue of the Detroit Theater organ Club News. (July 29, 1962)

*From July 29, 1962*

## THE STORY OF THE MIGHTY FISHER WURLITZER

by Doug Paterson

When the 28-story Fisher Building in Detroit was completed in 1928, it was the most costly commercial office building in the country and certainly one of the most beautiful.

Just off the building's three-story marble arcade was a 3000-seat theater in which every decorative detail was an authentic replica of some ancient Mayan relic or ruin recently discovered in the Jungles of Yucatan and Honduras. In keeping with this motif, the theater's great lobby with its tinkling fountains was a colorful profusion of tropical plants and birds brought from Mexico.

The Fisher Theater, advertised as "The World's Perfect Theater" opened on November 16, 1928. It featured first run motion pictures and lavish stage shows. It boasted a ballet company, a symphony orchestra and a pipe organ - one of the mightiest of Wurlitzer theater organs.

In fact, a full page ad in one of Detroit's newspapers proclaimed "A Wurlitzer - the perfect reproducer of everything musical - plus an originality that has no equal in music - this great instrument has been chosen for the world's perfect theatre, The Fisher."

The organ's 34 ranks of pipes - 2,297 pipes in all - were contained in four clammers at both

sides of the stage. The special four-manual console, elaborately decorated with the Mayan motif of the theater, sat on a high-lift elevator at the left side of the orchestra pit. A souvenir pamphlet given to first-night patrons explained that the organ was the first serious attempt to incorporate in one instrument the varied tonal elements necessary for both cinema and concert work.

Arthur Gutow played the opening night concert in which color interpretations of the music were made by the theater's unique lighting system. Other well-known organists featured at the Fisher console were Ole Foersch, Don Miller and Arsene Siegel. Each artist, in his own style, demonstrated the variety of moods and voices which this great instrument could produce.

When the Fisher's stage shows were discontinued in the 1930's, the organ was played only intermittently until 1952, when Don Miller began his regular Friday evening concerts. Then in 1956, the voice of the Mighty Fisher Wurlitzer again fell silent.

In 1960, multi-million dollar plans were completed to transform the Fisher into America's most beautiful legitimate theatre. This meant tearing out the entire Mayan interior right down to the bare steel beams, and literally rebuilding the thea-

ter from the ground up. So the 4-34 Wurlitzer was put up for sale.

Detroit's George Orbits was the successful bidder, and in February, 1961, with a handful of willing friends and faithful organ enthusiasts, he began the task of removing the instrument from the theater. The disassembled organ lay in storage until June, 1961, when it was moved to the newly-acquired home of the Detroit Theater Organ Club in the former Iris Theater.

The installation of the organ in the Iris was not easy. Since the size and shape of this theater did not permit placing the pipes near the stage, rows of seats were removed from the rear of the auditorium and four new chambers were built across the full width of the room. The 25-horse-power blower was anchored to the floor of the former projection booth, and the huge console and a full-size grand piano were installed on a platform built for this purpose in the center of the auditorium.

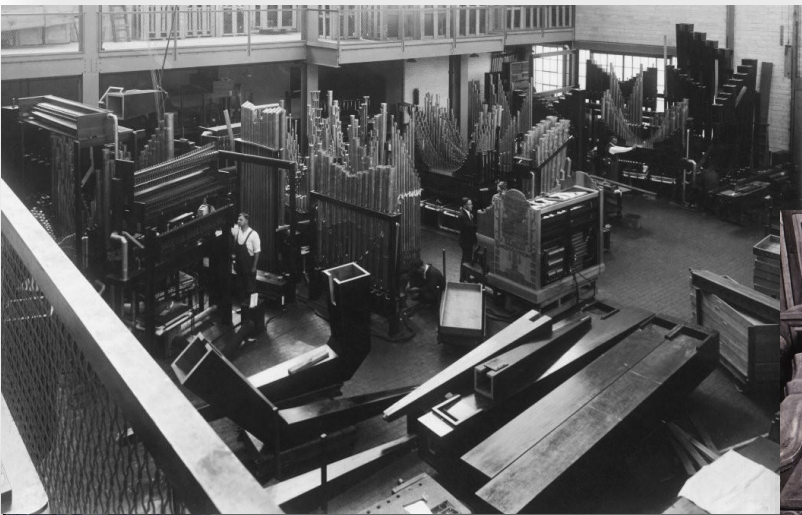
By September, 1961, the installation of the organ had progressed sufficiently to permit playing it at the first fall meeting of the Club.

## We need your help!

With more events at the Senate comes the need for more volunteers. Everything is needed from ticket sellers, ticket takers, concession stand workers, raffle table workers, clean-up crew, and everything else that needs done for each event.

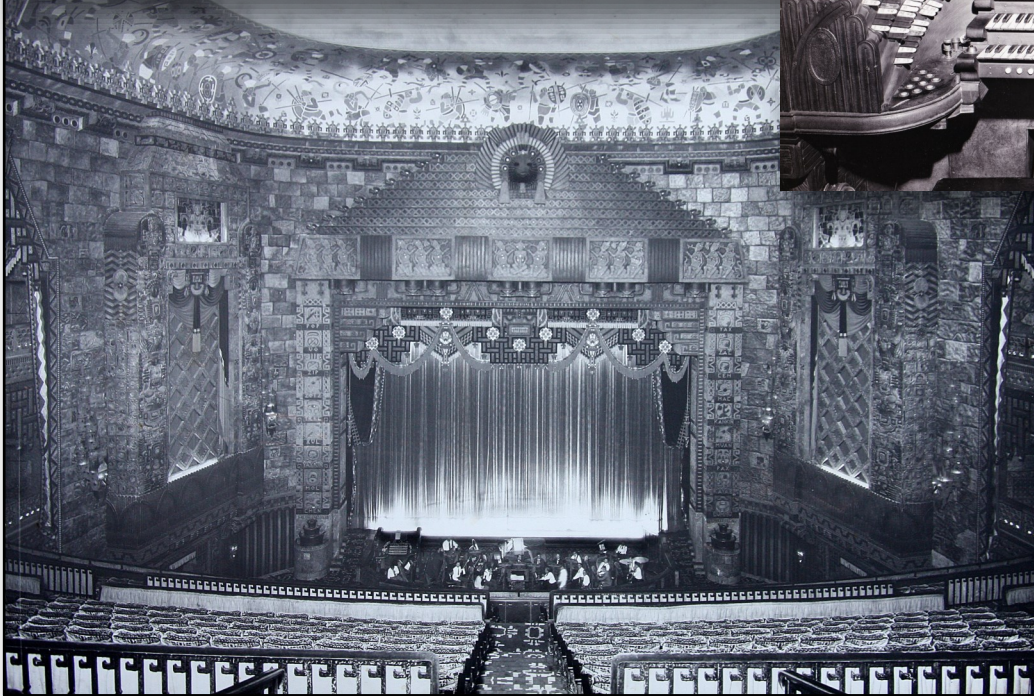
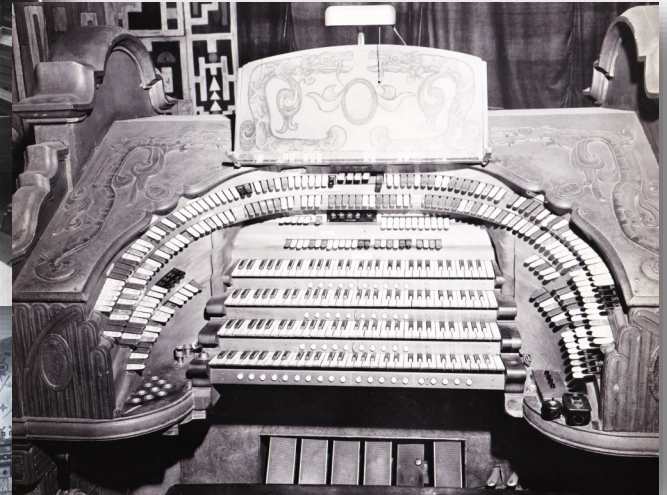
Please contact Lance Luce, Michael Fisher, Dave Calendine or Kevin Werner if you are able to help. It would be greatly appreciated!





Where has our Wurlitzer been? To the left is the organ shown on the floor of the Wurlitzer factory in New York.

Below is a picture of the console installed at the Fisher Theater in Detroit. (Thanks to John Lauter for sending this picture)

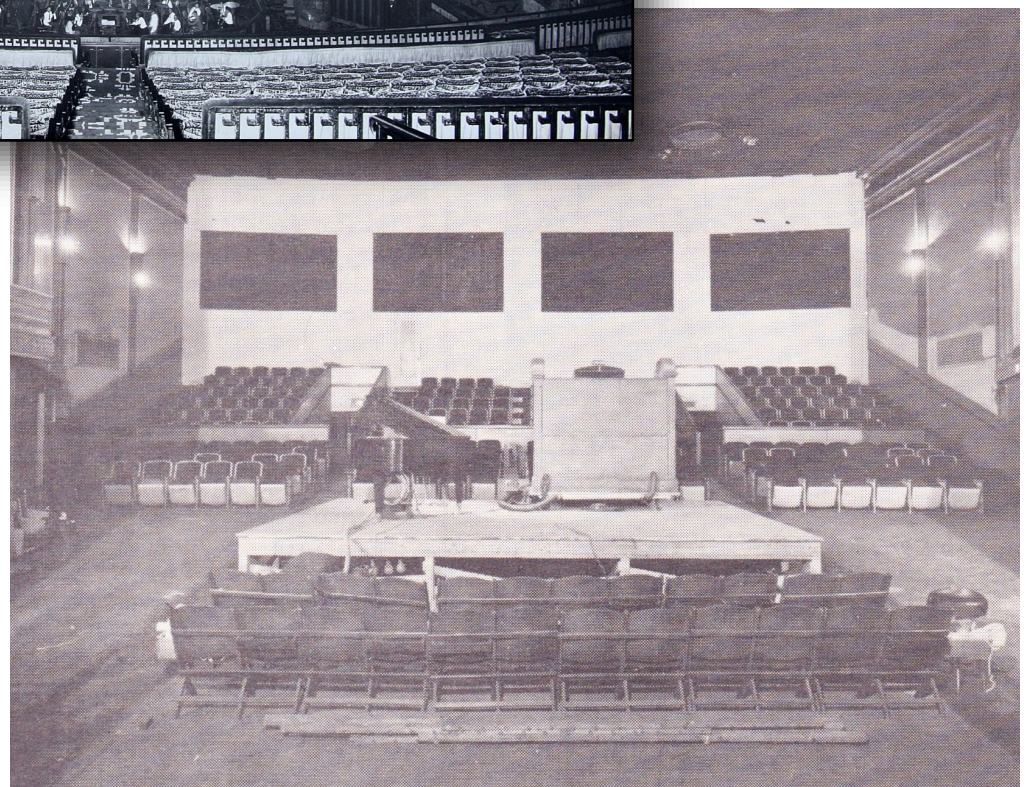


To the left is a picture of the original décor of the Fisher Theater in Detroit. A closer look at the orchestra pit shows the organ console on the left side of the orchestra pit. The pipe chambers are located behind the large grills on both sides of the stage.

To the right is a picture of the organ installed at the Iris Theater. Note that the pipe chambers were located in the back of the auditorium, with the console located as far front as the cable would permit it to be. A special platform was constructed to hold the console and the piano, which is playable from the organ console.

This picture was taken by George Orbits.

(Thanks to John Lauter for sending this picture in for inclusion in this Newsletter.)





DETROIT THEATER  
ORGAN SOCIETY

*Over 50 Years of Entertainment!*

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WE'RE ON THE WEB!

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## **2015 Concert Series**

May 17—David Rhodes

June 28—Ron Rhode

September 20—Bill Tandy

October 18—Ken Double

November 15—Nathan Avakian

December 6—John Lauter



photo: Lance Luce