



DETROIT THEATER ORGAN SOCIETY

Volume 57, Issue 1

February, 2018



DTOS
Executive Board
& Directors

2018 Concert Series at the Senate

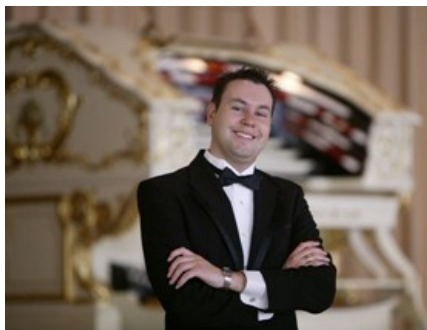
- **President**
Lance Luce
lanceluce@wowway.com
- **Vice President**
Michael Fisher
fisher.michael65@yahoo.com
- **Treasurer**
Dave Calendine
dave@calendine.net
- **Corporate Secretary**
Kevin Werner
kevwer@comcast.net
- Joan Brown
jbeethoven@netzero.com
- TJ Casterson
tcasterson73@gmail.com
- Christopher Dengate
Dengates@att.net
- Dick Leichtamer
tibiaplana434@buckeye-express.com
- Lynn Walls
clwalls@gmail.com
- Bob Weil
robertjweil@yahoo.com



March 18
Lance Luce



April 22
John Lauter



May 20
Brett Valliant



June 10
Nathan Avakian



September 16
Walt Strony



October 14
Christian Elliott



November 18
Hector Olivera



December 3
Stephen &
Rose Warner

Detroit Theatre Pipe Organs

The silent movies were never actually silent. In any given theatre, there would have been a piano, an orchestra, a pipe organ, or some combination thereof, and their job was to accompany films and stage acts. During that glorious, glamorous Golden Era of the silent film, a time period that roughly spanned from 1911 to 1930, over 130 of the theatres in the Detroit metro area acquired some sort of a pipe organ. What they were, where they were, and what happened to many of them will be soon revealed for all to see on the DTOS website.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, Detroit's population was just under 1,000,000 in 1920, and by 1930, that number increased to over 1,500,000. The numbers continued to grow, leaping another half million by 1950, peaking at nearly 2,000,000 people. Detroit's ever-burgeoning auto industry offered steady work with good paying incomes, drawing new residents from a wide-ranging area and helping to pave the road for them to follow their dreams. Surprisingly, the number of residents actually increased during World War II when the factories were temporarily converted for military needs. More people meant more entertainment venues, and in the Golden Era, that translated to more theatres and more organs.

Over the past year, several sources have been pulled together to result in what is believed to be the first ever comprehensive list of the theatre organs in the Detroit metro area. Soon, anyone will be able to go to the DTOS website and see for themselves. In addition to the organs, the list will also include all of the pertinent data regarding the

individual theatres; architects, street addresses, original seating capacity, years in operation, and any interesting bits of information known. In this introduction, we'll look at the different brands and models of the instruments in what was the nation's fourth largest and fastest growing city. Detroit was quite literally the nation's engine that made the Roaring Twenties roar.

In general, the vast majority of instruments had two manuals controlling less than eight ranks. It was the six Wurlitzer organs at the Capitol, State, Michigan, United Artists, Fox and Fisher theatres, plus the Barton organ in the Hollywood Theatre that would be considered "deluxe," and, save for a small handful of instruments, they were generally at least twice the size of anything else in the metro area.

Below is some basic information about the brands that arrived in Detroit over nearly two decades, along with the number of instruments installed by each company:

Wurlitzer (58 installations; including 14 photoplayers)

By the time this forward-thinking company bought out the company assets and notions of Robert Hope-Jones, it was already an established business giant, making nearly every type of musical instrument known, from violins to brass to pianos. After becoming established in the Detroit market in the mid-Teens, they really took over, resulting in twice as many installations as the second place holders. By the time the era ended, they iced the cake with four outstanding four-manual instruments and one five-manual within the city limits. Not only did they dominate with what we would consider typical theatre organs, but also with an ingeni-

us instrument known generically as the photoplayer, a clever piano-organ combination. This was very popular in the small theatres, accounting for roughly twenty-five percent of Wurlitzer's total output. That percentage was also reflected in the number installed in the Detroit metro area. Barely any survive anywhere to this day, with their pipes, percussions and mechanical components cannibalized for other instruments, or just thrown out in the trash when their intended purpose was no longer required. Surprisingly, some actually found an active life in churches, as you will see in the census. The Wurlitzer photoplayer cleverly tacked on a 61-note keyboard of a pipe organ over the standard 88-note keyboard of an upright piano. The lower keyboard was also able to play the organ stops, as well, so long as you didn't mind that the piano was automatically registered. For the bass, there was a standard 32-note pedalboard. Many pianists never really adapted to the organ, and therefore never touched a pedalboard. However, they could find those same 16' pedal stops duplicated in the manuals. This was usually only a Bourdon, but enough to be convincing in the smaller houses. Some may view it as more of a gimmick than a musical instrument, but it was a clever and effective way to adapt pianists quickly to a new type of instrument that nobody really knew how to play well. Musically, it's been said by those who heard them that they sounded more like band organs than our contemporary concept of theatre organ tone. If nothing else, it was a way for Wurlitzer to get their foot in the door, as at least some of those turned into later

What They Were, Where They Were, And Where They Went

sales of larger, more conventional instruments. In addition, they were also easier to repossess, if necessary. The Wurlitzer Building still stands on Niagara Falls Boulevard in North Tonawanda (Buffalo), New York, and is now home to warehouse, retail, studio and office spaces.

Marr & Colton (28 installations)

To this day, people poke fun at Marr & Colton organs, making jokes over their inherent cheapness. Nicknames like "Marr & Cardboard" or "Macaroni & Cheese" are not uncommon. But this little firm from Warsaw, New York cried all the way to the bank, especially considering the remarkable salesmanship of their ace Detroit representative, Reg Webb, who is credited with selling over sixty M&C organs in Detroit and elsewhere. It didn't hurt that he broadcast regularly over radio station WJR on an M&C organ installed in his home studio, just blocks from the Fisher Building. Marr & Colton organs had pretty tibias, great sounding wooden Violone basses and quality supply-house pipe-work overall, even if it was scaled on the puny side. In the traps and effects department, they may be best remembered for their clever slide whistle, which has been copied and marketed in modern times.

Hilgreen-Lane (24 installations)

Today, organ buffs scarcely recall the name, yet Hilgreen-Lane got out ahead of nearly every other builder by almost a decade, beginning in 1911 at the Columbia Theatre on Monroe Avenue. It was also the company's first organ installed in a movie theatre anywhere. This modest-sized church organ builder in Alliance, Ohio (near Canton) ultimately produced about 170 total instruments for

theatres, of which 24 came to Detroit (their largest theatre market). These were not what we think of today as the colorful and robust instruments that came to be known as theatre organs, but to be fair, neither did any of the rest of them in the early Teens when it all started. They more closely resembled residence organs of the wealthy, filled with muted, orchestral tones for providing pleasant background music. The one thing that Hilgreen-Lane may have possessed that none of the other "proper" church builders had was a forward-thinking business plan. Either that, or just dumb luck. While the rest of them were apparently worrying about what the churches might think about a firm that provided organs to film entertainment venues, H-L was cleaning up with both church and theatre sales. Their geographic location allowed them to easily provide many instruments in burgeoning industrial areas like Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Detroit, amongst others. Unfortunately, they never really developed musically; something that all of the other successful builders managed to do. Likewise, their mechanical notions were more like something out of a Rube Goldberg cartoon, and they did not change to the standard pitman chest until the early 1950s. All of the progressive church organ builders abandoned ventillation and had gone to the pitman type by 1930. We can only imagine that these mechanical nightmares failed after a few years of heavy use, and managers and owners threw up their hands, choosing to replace them with another brand that used a more reliable action. While they were first to enter the Detroit market, they were also the first to leave it. Local sales dropped dramatically in the years immediately following installation of their magnum opus in the downtown Capitol Theatre in 1921. They were gone by 1925,

around the time that same instrument came out in favor of the first Wurlitzer Publix #1, only four years later. However, H-L got the last laugh, building the very last all-new pipe organ for a theatre anywhere in 1948 for a movie house in Toronto, still on lower wind pressures, still designed much as they were twenty years earlier and still a big yawn tonally.

Barton (24 installations; including 6 photoplayers)

This audacious little company from Oshkosh, Wisconsin tied for third place in the Detroit market. Given the fact that Bartola Musical Instruments had the smallest factory, worked the smallest territory and had the smallest amount of capitalization, it's nothing short of amazing what it was able to accomplish. That includes the building of the six-manual behemoth that played for sporting events at the Chicago Stadium from 1929 to the very end of operations there in 1994. In addition, Bartola was the fifth most prolific builder of theatre instruments overall, with nearly 350 instruments produced. Their version of the photoplayer, not surprisingly called a Bartola, consisted of one or two organ pipe and percussion/trap cabinets connected via cables to swing-out keyboards that could attach to any standard upright piano. Like Wurlitzer's photoplayers, they were considered to be a foot in the door to more conventional instruments built by the firm. The 4/21 Barton in Detroit's Hollywood Theatre was considered to be among the company's best instruments anywhere. While Barton organs have occasionally been ridiculed over the years as "fartin' Bartons," these musical workhorses account for most of the original theatre installations that still exist in the state of Michigan.

Robert-Morton (12 installations)

This Van Nuys, California firm was always on the ropes financially, but managed to sur-

vive through the era with a good product and some talented people working for them. Their instruments were known for sizzling strings, pretty Tibias and potent bass stops. Like Wurlitzer, they also produced a series of cabinet organs known as photoplayers. Many of their smallest organs East of the Mississippi River were built by Wicks of Highland, Illinois, which bore little resemblance musically or mechanically to the California firm's instruments. Music teacher Mary Harrison and husband Jim became members of DTOC starting in the mid-Sixties. In the Spring of 1965, they bought a 2/6 (Wicks) Morton, originally installed in the Frolic Theatre in Midland. While it never came to fruition, the plan was to install it in Mary's music studio in the carriage house behind their turn-of-the-century home in Lansing. Seeking any available information, they contacted Wicks at that time, who vehemently denied ever having built theirs or any other theatre organ. That stern denial was debunked in 1985 with the publication of Dave Junchen's "Encyclopedia of the American Theatre Organ, Volume 1." It confirmed that Robert-Morton was Wicks' biggest customer during the Silent Era, building dozens upon dozens of small organs for theatres. Ahh, yes...what will the neighbors think...

Kimball (5 installations)

One of the great names in organbuilding that is vastly underrated in both theatre and church circles, rating right up there with the Skinner and Casavant instruments built at that time. Their pipework was made and voiced with jeweler's precision. But, like Wurlitzer, Kimball was a business first and an organbuilder second. Both companies produced other musical instruments that made millions for them. As with all of the others, the pipe organ division was shut down at the begin-

ning of World War II, and like Wurlitzer, never restarted. With the advent of the electronic tone generator, the emerging church and home market drew all of Kimball's attention on that front. George Michel, who was the Organ Department's tonal director and head voicer created sizzling strings unlike any others, and on the church side, the first all-tin Principal chorus since the days of Silbermann (Bach's organbuilder). This brand is often criticized by organ buffs for lacking pretty Tibias or a "true theatrical sound," but when played orchestrally, Kimball organs are unsurpassed.

Moller (4 installations)

As a builder of pipe organs, this venerable Hagerstown, Maryland firm outlasted all of the rest of those who built for theatres, closing their doors and auctioned off in 1992. Tonally, both their church and theatre instruments from that era are known for being "wooly," with large scaled pipework and conservative voicing.

Page (1 installation)

This small Ohio firm did not do especially well in Michigan, but it did make a presence, with theatre installations in Grand Rapids, Flint and other medium-sized cities in the state. A few outstanding examples of their work exist today, mostly in Ohio and Indiana. Like other small builders, they relied heavily upon good supply houses like Schopp and Gottfried. They survived after the theatre era with church work, and their modest Lima factory is still in use today by an organbuilder.

Building one or two each were other firms who were too small or too late to make much of a dent in the business, or simply disinterested in building theatre instruments in the first place. Those included Aeolian-Skinner, Casavant, Estey, Karn-Morris and Seeburg-Smith.

So what happened to the organs? Clearly, we're aware that several instruments remained

Organs of Detroit ... continued

intact and some even play yet today. While we don't know exactly what happened to many, we can speculate. If we first look at the lifespan of each theatre, that alone may tell us a significant portion of the story. Wurlitzer documented many, if not most of the instruments that were repossessed, and we can only imagine that the purchasing party failed to make their monthly payments for a variety of reasons. Some were wholly transplanted elsewhere intact, some were cannibalized for use in other instruments, and the rest is unclear or unknown. One Wurlitzer photoplayer appears to have been built for a theatre in another state, repossessed, reinstalled in a Detroit theatre, repossessed a second time and reinstalled yet again in another Detroit area theatre. Depending on the situation, the process of repossession may have been friendly, or mildly abusive by the theatre staff, or one during which the sheriff had to serve legal papers and stand around for days while the crew removed the organ. When a theatre chose to upgrade their existing instrument, it could be advertised to the public as being "new," especially if the console were re-

placed in the deal, or if only the console were replaced. Theatres often tacked on the word "new" to their name if they performed even the most minor redecoration. It's show biz, right? It would appear that in the instances during which an instrument was replaced by another of a different brand, it was probably due to either mechanical unreliability, or the customer just wanted something that was showier with more keyboards or had more sonic "pizzazz." In those days, we can surmise that regular tunings and service calls that weren't called for in the original sales contracts were performed by the organist, a local firm, or not at all. Getting a new organ would also have the added benefit of an organ that was in good tune, at least when the installation crew left.

We do know for a fact that many instruments went to churches almost immediately, sans traps and most or all percussions. Detroit area organbuilder Steve Bodman, who installed and serviced many of the Marr & Colton and Wurlitzer organs in the area claimed to have moved about fifty organs from theatres to churches after the era ended.

Not exactly appropriate for church services even then, but the organs surely made music and all were almost new. Given the state of the economy at that point, it was about as close to nirvana as many of those congregations could ever hope to get. Who paid for them? Did the churches take over the payments, as you would a car? Did the organbuilders and supply houses eat the costs? Or settle for a lower price? This is probably lost to history. Most builders made at least some attempt at repossession when the Sound Era dawned and the organs were no longer needed. That is, until their warehouses bulged and business even for church instruments ground to nearly a halt during the Depression. Wurlitzer openly advertised that they were selling competitive brand church instruments for half-price of new that had been traded in on one of theirs. We can rest assured that they made money on those deals, too. We also know that many organs were the victims of vandalism and thieves, and some were raided for their metal during emergency scrap drives during World War II. The advent and widespread use of television

immediately after the war killed off many theatres that later sat empty, sometimes for decades. Some were simply tossed out with the trash in order to create additional storage space for the theatre, or to accommodate lighting and sound equipment. In many cases, interested parties were simply given permission to raid the chambers for what they wanted when the organs lost their usefulness and market value. If they weren't somehow acquired by organ buffs, the surviving organs that remained either rotted under leaking roofs or went down with the buildings. When you think about it, the fact that so many of them survived at all is nothing short of miraculous.

To view the census, go to: www.dtos.org

Thanks to John Lauter, Lance Luce, Dave Voydanoff and Glenn Rank for their assistance with the compilation of this census.

Special thanks to Roger Mumbrie, whose detailed record-keeping of this subject over many years served as a major resource.

Scott Smith

NOTICE OF ANNUAL MEETING

Sunday, March 11, 2018

3:00 p.m.

Senate Theater Lobby

N

otes from the Editor

I am happy to get this Newsletter out. Lots of great things to talk about.

As you can see on the front page, we have an excellent concert series coming up this year, starting with our own Lance Luce in March.

I am also excited that Scott Smith has worked long and hard on a great article about the organs of Detroit. I knew of many of them, but to read this article has been a real treat, and I thank Scott for all of the time he spent researching and writing this.

The next thing of note is the Annual Meeting that will be happening on Sunday, March 11, at 3:00 p.m. This is your time to come and hear from the Board of Directors regarding what is going on with the organization. I can't encourage you enough to come to

this meeting. This is *your* organization. We need to hear from you, and the Annual Meeting lets you hear from us. Come out and see what the Board has been doing!

This past year has been busy with work on our "home" at the Senate Theater. Work on the boiler has been ongoing, as we work to update its aging parts. Work on the restrooms, both men's and women's, has bought much-needed repairs to them. The wall on the East side of the building had much work done on it, which has resulted in a stronger foundation of our building, and has stopped the long-happening water leaks that have taken a toll on the plasterwork on the wall. The ceiling in the inner lobby had work done to it, and an exit stairwell and door has been restored.

The front of the building is still a work in progress, with the most recent work being a "box" built to cover the mangled mess of metal left after the old marquee was removed. It is hoped that a digital sign can be placed on the new "box" so that we can let everyone know that we are open for business!

Inside the theatre, our sound and light booth is well under way to be being completed. New cables and wires have been run under the auditorium to connect the booth to the stage. Soon, new speakers will be hung to provide better sound for events and movies. The new booth will also enable us to provide organizations that rent us a better place to run their lights and sound.

All of these projects have

Dave Calendine
Treasurer, DTOS

been worked on by a small crew of dedicated members of our organization. All of these projects also cost money.

Being the treasurer, and after closing out the books for 2017, I can say that we had a great year, but the major renovations to our Senate Theater have come at a great cost. The year saw a deficit of roughly \$11,000. If we did not have to have the major work on the wall done, we would have turned a nice profit. However, with that wall done, years of constant water repairs are now done. With rentals, movies, and organ concerts, and a dedicated Board of Directors keeping the wheel turning, I am looking forward to a great year at the Senate.

I hope to see you at the Annual Meeting on March 11.

Upcoming Movies at the Senate Theater

Friday, February 16—8pm—SHAFT

Saturday, February 17—3pm—Foxy Brown

Saturday, February 17—8pm—Super Fly

Saturday, February 24—8pm—The Philadelphia Story

Saturday, March 3—3pm—Annie

Friday, March 9—8pm—Notorious

Saturday, March 10—8pm—Rear Window

Saturday, March 24—8pm—Jesus Christ Superstar

Saturday, April 7—The Black Pirate (Silent)

Accompanied on the Wurlitzer Theater Organ by Scott Smith

DETROIT THEATER
ORGAN SOCIETY

Over 50 Years of Entertainment!

Detroit Theater Organ Society

Dave Calendine, Editor & Publisher
DTOS Newsletter
The Senate Theater
6424 Michigan Ave.

Phone: (313) 894-0850
Concert Hotline: (313) 894-4100

WE'RE ON THE WEB!

WWW.DTOS.ORG

2018 Concert Series

March 18—Lance Luce

April 22—John Lauter

May 20—Brett Valliant

June 10—Nathan Avakian

September 16—Walt Strony

October 14—Christian Elliott

November 18—Hector Olivera

December 3—Stephen & Rose Warner



photo: Lance Luce