

JOURNAL OF THE AMERICAN THEATRE ORGAN SOCIETY

# Theatre Organ

SEPTEMBER | OCTOBER 2019

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# A GOLDEN CELEBRATION SEASON: The 50th Year of Concerts on the Dickinson Kimball

BY KEN DOUBLE

(The author had the great privilege of performing the last concert of the 49th season of performances for the Dickinson Theatre Organ Society, which generated some reflections on the upcoming momentous occasion.)

During the course of the next several paragraphs, there will be evidence of liberal use of the Thesaurus. For how many times can one write or reference terms like *Great*, or *Successful*, or *Historic*, or *Spectacular*? By any measurement and against any comparison, the greatest and most consistently successful series of concerts ever presented on a theatre pipe organ will celebrate a 50th anniversary this coming season. Who could have predicted that a dusty old Kimball saved by a group of Wilmington, Delaware, organ enthusiasts would blend together to become the standard bearer of theatre pipe organ concert presentations?

The Dickinson Theatre Organ Society, led by a high school teacher who dreamed of having a theatre pipe organ in his school's auditorium, last June completed its 49th season of concerts. And that teacher, the indefatigable Bob Dilworth—now President Emeritus of the group—and the entire organization will celebrate a Golden Anniversary season and reward themselves with a special year of very special concerts.

The story has been told often. The Boyd Theatre Philadelphia Kimball found a new home at a high school in Wilmington. It's a great story involving school student volunteers and midnight ventures into a theatre still showing movies. This original group, who got it all going now 50 years ago, will be reunited in the coming anniversary season. Just for the record, here are the names of a few of those hearty souls who had no idea what they were getting into, or what an impact their actions would create: Gary Connor, Debby Gartley, Robert Wilhelm, Jr., and Peter Wool were the four most active in the group which numbered close to 30 students.

And those of us who love the theatre organ and follow its history know the organ grew—first, beyond 20 ranks. And grew some more—beyond 30 ranks. And then the Kimball exploded in growth to its current 66 ranks, the fourth largest theatre pipe organ in the world.

It wasn't simply the pipework and the number of ranks. DTOS has seen a

Kimball console; a Möller console used temporarily while the Kimball was re-specified; and now two Kimball consoles allowing for spectacular two-organist concert presentations. Not many can boast that.

And this growth was not simply an exercise in “can we top this?” The expansion of the Kimball was planned, purposefully and spectacularly successful. The sound of this great Kimball in the school's auditorium is singular, distinctive, and thrilling. Totally different from any Wurlitzer, it is completely satisfying to any listener who loves theatre organ. And the artists who play it adore it.

And while several can claim they had influence and impact in the growth of the organ, the kudos and praise go to another indefatigable genius in our world, the legendary Brant Duddy.

His guiding hand based on musicality, taste and integrity steered the DTOS group in the right direction. Without Brant Duddy, it is safe to say the Dickinson Kimball would be a “nice theatre organ.” Because of Brant Duddy, a key participant among many (including Simon Gledhill who created the stoplist) this is one of the greatest pipe organs – theatre organ or otherwise – in the world today.

The golden anniversary year celebrates a past that is storied. From the all-night “Dick Smith Happenings” that resulted in post-concert breakfasts; to a dazzling convention pairing that had audiences hearing Simon Gledhill AND Richard Hills playing duets on the two consoles; to a dress-wearing Cameron Carpenter thinking the stodgy ATOS'rs needed a jolt; to Tony Fenelon using the Kimball as orchestral accompaniment to his own incredible solos on the concert grand piano; the greatest names in our field have presented the greatest music imaginable. The Kimball has seen it all, presented it all, and in nearly 300 concerts has brought out the very best in those artists because that's what the great inspirational instruments truly do.

And the audiences bought tickets. By the thousands. For years and years and years. And while the crowds have diminished somewhat (which theatre organ groups these days are not suffering from fewer attendees?), nonetheless the appreciative listeners make the trek up the curving driveway and stroll into the auditorium to enjoy an instrument of the highest quality; from artists of the

highest quality; to enjoy showmanship presented at the highest level of quality; and then enjoy that distinctive on-stage visit with the artist, with some cookies and punch to send the attendees home happy. Quality entertainment, indeed.

One can quickly read the list of artists on the bill for the 50th season, and realize perhaps a trip to Wilmington this year is in order. The lineup is stellar.

**SEPTEMBER 21:** Dave Wickerham

**OCTOBER 19:** Annual Open House with silent film accompanied by Glenn Hough

**NOVEMBER 22:** Hector Olivera

**DECEMBER 7:** *Holiday Spectacular*, produced by Carl Black, Jr. with John Baratta

**JANUARY 25, 2020:** David Gray

**MARCH 14:** Jelani Eddington and Donnie Rankin, double console concert

**MARCH 28:** *Saturday at the Silents*, a short comedy plus a feature film accompanied by John Baratta

**APRIL 25:** Simon Gledhill and Richard Hills, double console concert

**APRIL 26:** *Remembering the Dick Smith Happening*, Dick Smith

**JUNE 13:** Peter Richard Conte (Organist at the Wanamaker Organ)

That term “quality” referenced above most certainly applies. And it is a term Bob Dilworth and his team over the years felt was vital to the success of the concerts. The organ, musicians and overall entertainment must be of the highest quality if audiences are to be expected to return.

There are others around the country that have had and continue to have success. But none have presented so much great music, to so many, concert after concert, leading up to what will be another spectacular season of shows at Dickinson High School in Wilmington, Delaware on the great Kimball theatre organ. It's concert season number 50 for the Dickinson Theatre Organ Society, the historic milestone Golden Anniversary. Spectacular. Sensational. Unbelievable. You grab the Thesaurus and add your own superlative. They all apply.

And congratulations to all at DTOS for unparalleled success in presenting the music we love to an audience who loves it. And here's a toast to 50 more!