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Dickinson Celebrates **50 YEARS**



HARD WORK AND OPTIMISM:

The Story of Dickinson Theatre Organ Society's 50 Seasons of Success

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Out of all the chapters in the American Theatre Organ Society, why would one be able to develop a record of success like the 50 years of the Dickinson Theatre Organ Society? What has made possible the respect of artists and the support of the audience over all these years?

One of the factors in the success of DTOS is, undeniably, good fortune. From the start of the project, the "theatre organ gods" were smiling on us. The instrument given to us by the RKO Stanley Warner Company was in nearby Philadelphia. It was larger than most theatre organs (19 ranks) with all the technical developments made during the silent film era. It was a Kimball organ with an ensemble of sounds that were pleasing to the ear.

The actual donation had to be to a non-profit organization. The board of Dickinson High School considered the organ project, which was spearheaded by Bob Dilworth, who was on their faculty. They accepted the organ and allowed the space for it to be installed. When the group was ready to present concerts, the board agreed to waive

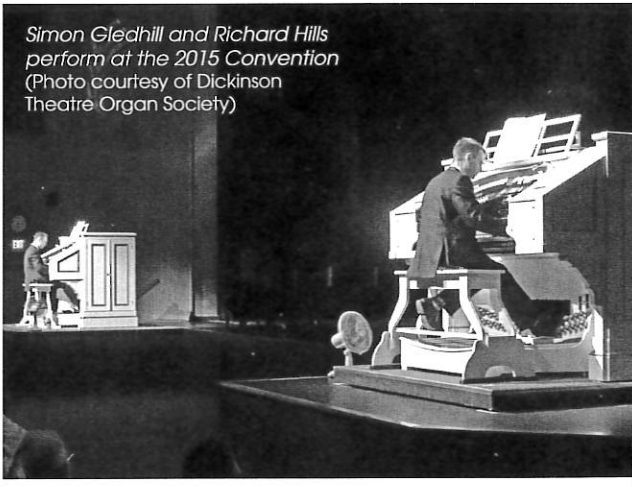
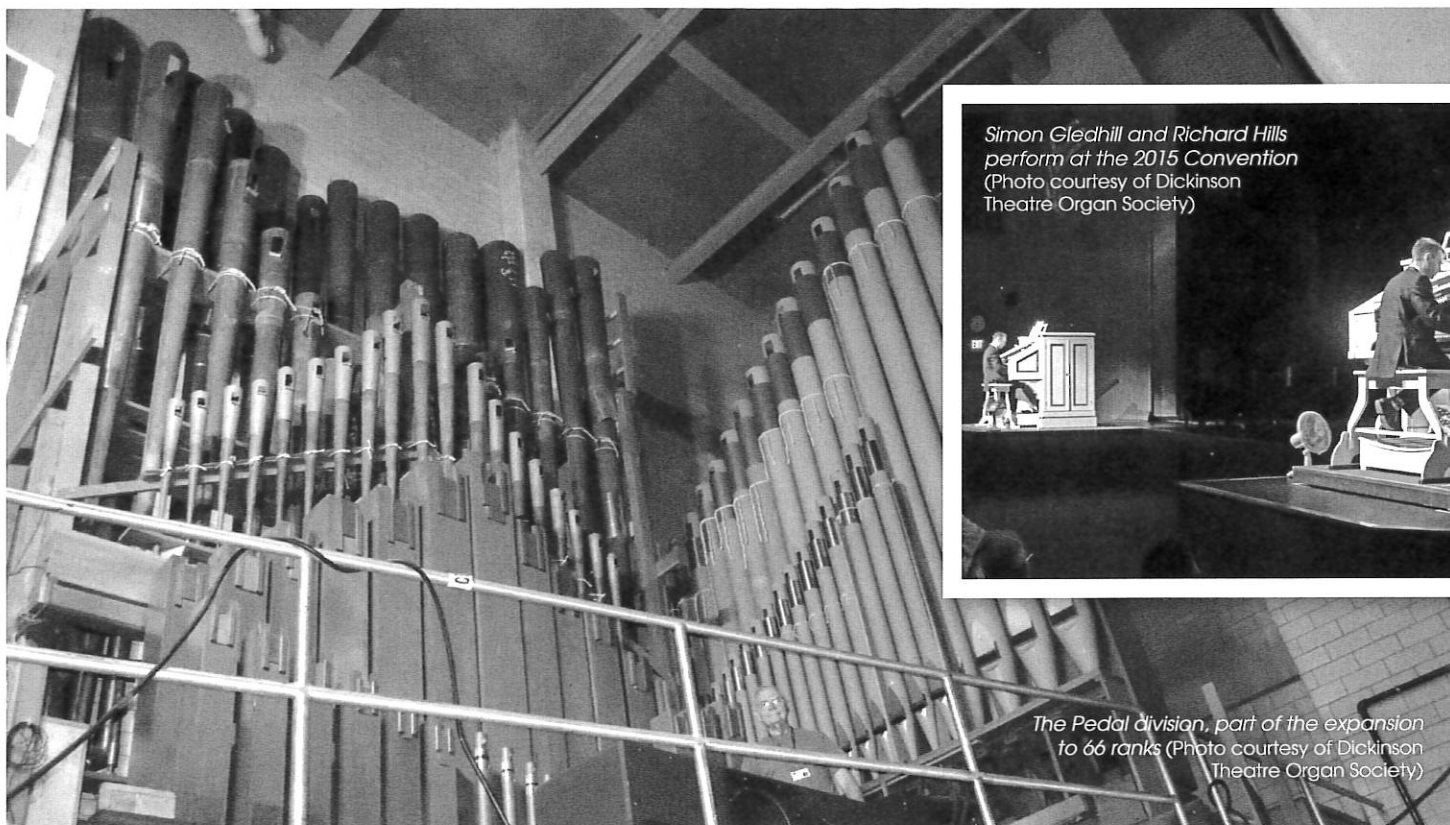
the auditorium rental fees. In exchange, the organ group agreed to maintain the organ without charge and to give occasional gifts for the stage and auditorium. This agreement continues in effect to the present.

Most of the persons working on the organ at the school were students that had no experience with such things. Fortunately, many people from the Theatre Organ Society of the Delaware Valley offered help and advice, from helping with the "Farewell Concert" to creating a mailing list. Chief among these has been Brant Duddy, a well-known organ mechanic, whose excellent ear and knowledge of the organ world have guided the growth of the instrument. Fortunately, he is a longtime friend of Bob Dilworth, the leader of the project, and they have worked together well.

The organ and the group have benefited from the consistency of vision possible over the years by having the same leadership since the beginning. Bob Dilworth has presented the vision and attracted many of the people needed to carry it out. In some ways it is truly "the Dickinson family."

Even all these advantages would not be enough to ensure success. The other factor is that DTOS has remained true to two principles over the years: *Do it right the first time* and *Keep the audience happy*. Many of our problems have been caused by ignoring one or both of those principles. One time we overlooked errors to avoid hurting someone's feelings. The time and expense needed to repair the damage hurt DTOS severely.

Do it right the first time may sound harsh, but there is no workable alternative. When the Kimball was being installed in the school—and in the years to follow—it was sometimes tempting to do a quick fix on a chest or pipe, promising to do it the correct way when there was more time. As other organ groups have learned, that quick fix gives out, usually at an inconvenient time. Brant's insistence on doing each job the right way has resulted in a reliable instrument where everything works. This means that an artist does not have to rearrange his playing around a missing note or rank. It helps the artist present a better concert and that is



Simon Gledhill and Richard Hills perform at the 2015 Convention (Photo courtesy of Dickinson Theatre Organ Society)

The Pedal division, part of the expansion to 66 ranks (Photo courtesy of Dickinson Theatre Organ Society)

good for the artist, the audience, and for DTOS's reputation.

Sometime after each concert Bob would ask the artist whether there was any rank or aspect of the organ that, if added, would have been helpful in playing the concert. Although the original 19 ranks offered more variety than smaller organs, there are many more "colors" in the sound spectrum that could enrich the music. (If the organ were a box of crayons, the basic eight colors could work in a picture, but the levels of color possible with the 36-crayon set would be much better.)

All these suggestions were considered and acted on when it was possible. Brant's contacts in the organ world and Walter Froelich from RKO Stanley-Warner found hidden treasures in many places. A crew from DTOS would carefully relocate them to Dickinson where they would be stored and then added to the organ. Thanks to Brant's "ear" the pipes that were chosen would blend with the rest of the ensemble. In this way the organ gradually grew to the present size, adding colors to the spectrum available to the artist.

The secret of a successful concert season is not one concert; it is getting the audience at that first concert to come back. This is the motive behind the second principle of our success. Bob found (in Ben Hall's book *The Best Remaining Seats*) the idea that the audience at the concert should be in a world without cares. He decided that DTOS would treat our audiences like the guests they are. None of the problems or technical aspects should be visible; our problems would not trouble them. From the parking lot, through the lobby, and into their seats, they would be assisted by DTOS volunteers.

After the concert there would be a reception on stage where they could meet the artist and chat with other fans. And it has worked! Even in recent years when attendance at theatre organ concerts is dropping, our audiences are still faithful.

Perhaps such complete care of the audience can go too far. Recently we had to end the reserved seating plan for the auditorium because there was no one to take charge of the ticket sales. No one wanted to spend the hours keeping track of the reserved seats. The change to "open" seating came as a shock to some regular attendees who dropped out for a few concerts.

Even a group blessed by the "theatre organ gods" can have a crisis or two (or more) in 50 years.

But in each case DTOS has found a way to continue.

- Following a Lee Erwin/Gloria Swanson "concert" that cost much more than it brought in, we needed a source of income to continue the season. Out of the blue the school offered us the income from operating the refreshment stand in the gym. We worked at every home basketball game and wrestling match, but the profit from that kept us going and growing. Eventually we built a stand in the lobby for auditorium events.
- When the original console showed signs of needing a complete overhaul that would take much longer than our summer break, we acquired a replacement console (a Möller) that George Wright had in storage. Because the Möller did not fit on our lift it was played from center stage for several years until the Kimball was

ready. We re-introduced the Kimball in an elaborate opening of a Tom Hazleton concert, complete with a "Phantom of the Opera" at the Möller!

- In 1995, fire did not reach the auditorium, but half our season was closed during the repairs to the part of the school that burned. All the pipes in the organ had to be taken down to be cleaned of the acid-bearing smoke residue. In the seven months before our next season, Brant and the crew added 24 ranks that had been collected to add to the ensemble of sound. There was a glorious sound for the next season!
- In 2016, half our concerts were cancelled because the auditorium HVAC system was being replaced.

What do you do when life gives you lemons? We changed the combination system in the main console, added 10 spotlights in the auditorium and replaced the main stage curtain (these were gifts to the school). And in June when the auditorium was reopened, we held a free concert which we called the Lemonade Concert.

The Lemonade Season is an example of the spirit that has enabled DTOS to thrive for 50 seasons. Making the most of good fortune and overcoming disappointments with hard work and fueled by optimism, the people of DTOS will continue to present the glorious sound of the Dickinson Kimball.

