

**American Theatre Organ Society  
Historic Theatre Organ Preservation Program**

**STATEMENT OF NEED**

It is a sad paradox that we have fewer as-built, original theatre organs from the 20th century than church organs from the 18th and 19th centuries! This is astounding when you consider the number of theatre organs produced in the instrument's golden age just over a half-century ago. Theatre organs by the hundreds have been lost forever through carelessness, thoughtless alteration and enlargement, as well as negligent storage, rebuilding and maintenance; sometimes at the hand of ATOS members and in the name of "preservation" or "restoration." Several societies exist worldwide to encourage preservation of church organs and it is past time for the ATOS to sponsor a similar activity for theatre organs.

Aside from the pure academic and nostalgic reasons for preserving examples of the craft of theatre organ building, there is a strong economic reason. Because the theatre organ, unlike the church organ, was built on a definite system of design even to the point of standardized models, there is no reason the theatre organ cannot gain the same "collectible" status as classic cars, orchestrions, music boxes, phonographs, etc. People have made huge investments in the theatre organ hobby only to find a limited market when time comes to sell an instrument. This is because there is no standard of quality and desirability in the theatre organ hobby. It is not too late to establish the kind of standards which will increase the value of theatre organs.

**STRATEGIES FOR THEATRE ORGAN PRESERVATION**

There is no way that the ATOS can prevent bad practices in theatre organ restoration and maintenance. However, the ATOS can encourage good work by recognizing it! By setting standards and then making highly publicized awards to instruments and their owners who meet these standards, ATOS can prevent the destruction of the few remaining original theatre organs and encourage high-quality work on theatre organs built or assembled for today's musical needs.

We recommend establishing categories for theatre organs (much like those for automobiles such as Classic, Antique, etc.). A blue-ribbon committee would then nominate instruments for plaques or certificates recognizing their status. These nominations would be publicized in Theatre Organ journal and awards would be presented at the annual convention, being accorded the same status as "Hall of Fame," "Member of The Year," etc.

Another function of the committee would be to handle complaints against individuals or groups actively violating the purposes of the Guidelines, and to make a list of bona fide restorers or consultants.

**CATEGORIES OF EXCELLENCE**

In order to be included in any one of the three following ATOS award categories, the instrument and its restoration process must qualify under the ATOS general guidelines for theatre organ restoration and maintenance.

Descriptions of each of the three historic categories of theatre organs follows (along with the additional special qualifications required for each category):

**HERITAGE INSTRUMENTS:** Heritage instruments are those which present to us a faithful picture of what the theatre organ was like in its golden age. This category includes original instruments in original locations, original instruments moved to acoustically compatible new locations, instruments restored faithfully to their original condition, and instruments newly built or assembled from parts which follow exactly all details of a theatre organ as built by a theatre organ manufacturer prior to World War II.

The only alterations from original condition which are allowed are:

- Replacement of perishable parts with original type materials or appropriate substitute materials of originals are not available.
- Replacement of generator with rectifier.
- Replacement of electrical cabling if required by National Electrical Code in the case of a relocated instrument.
- Re-framing and replacement of wind conductors if done to original standards in the case of a relocated organ.
- Re-regulation of pipework, but only in order to correct problems which have occurred subsequent to the original installation.

In this classification, equal importance is given to instruments regardless of age, size, builder, or any other special characteristic provided they meet the above qualifications. For example, a perfectly original Style D Wurlitzer would be as important a member of this class as a four manual Fox Special. Although the Fox Special may be a far more famous instrument, the Style D represents a type of instrument that was probably heard by more movie patrons than any other in the golden age of the theatre organ.

Likewise, a Style 35 Wurlitzer with its straight Solo division and no Tibia unification would be just as important as a late model Style 260 which more closely represents the sound we are interested in today.

Instruments which would be candidates for this category if properly restored would be the Paramount Studio organ and the last Wurlitzer organ ever built, Opus 2238. In other words, the list would include instruments which have gained world fame as well as those which are of interest simply because they represent a point of historic importance.

**VINTAGE INSTRUMENTS** This category includes instruments assembled from original parts or built new as reproductions (or a combination of both) which follow the general ideas of a single theatre organ builder but which do not necessarily emulate any particular instrument or model of instrument. These could represent the design philosophy of a company active during the golden age of the theatre organ or could represent a point of development the builder might have reached had it stayed in business. An example of the former would be the Castro Theatre Wurlitzer in San Francisco. An example of the latter would be the Berkeley Community Theatre in Berkeley, California.

In addition to those allowed in the Heritage category, the following alterations are allowable for the Vintage category:

- Changes in stop list (both voices and unification.)
- Use of components from different periods in the builder's history.
- Changes in the design of the winding system.
- Use of Solid-state relay and/or combination action where dictated by constraint of space or moveability of the console to multiple locations in a public auditorium having multiple uses.

**LANDMARK INSTRUMENTS** We recognize that the theatre organ is a living, constantly evolving musical instrument. Although it is important to preserve examples of the past, it is equally important to encourage excellent new work along progressive tonal and mechanical lines. Landmark instruments are those which represent high-quality ideals of organ building, but which do not necessarily reflect the style of any past theatre organ builder. Since few, if any, theatre organs are built today, it is permissible for organs in this category to be made from parts of one or more theatre organ manufacturers of the past provided the work follows the ATOS general guidelines for theatre organ restoration and maintenance AND provided that no instrument which would be a candidate for Heritage or Vintage status is destroyed in order to create a supply of parts for a Landmark instrument.

An example of the Landmark category would have been John Seng's instrument at Mundelein, as well as the Buddy Cole and the George Wright recording organs if they still existed and met the requirements of the ATOS guidelines today.

In this category, there are no restrictions against the use of solid state relays and combination actions, electric console stop actions, non-traditional wind systems, non-traditional stop lists, etc. Following the ATOS general guidelines for theatre organ restoration and maintenance and achieving a generally recognized result of mechanical and musical integrity are the requirements.

**STATUS PENDING** This category would cover complete instruments which are in storage as of June 1, 1992 and which would meet the requirements of a Vintage or Heritage instrument pending restoration and installation. Specific requirements for storage and current condition must be met in order to gain status in the category.

The instrument must be in good, restorable condition with minimal damage due to water, vermin, or poor handling or storage conditions. All components must be stored in crates or appropriately padded and protected from atmospheric, mechanical, or vermin damage. Pipes must be stored in shallow pipe trays, individually wrapped or properly padded as protection from corrosion, crushing, denting, and accumulation of dirt.

The storage area must be well protected from the elements and appropriate measures taken to provide ample security as protection from vandalism, and pilfering. The importance of properly storing a valuable instrument cannot be overstated.

Upon completion of restoration and installation according to the ATOS Guidelines, the instrument will be eligible for re-evaluation as a candidate for either Vintage or Heritage categories. Any such instrument broken up for parts will void the award and the instrument in which component parts are included will not be eligible for Landmark category status.