

Young Theatre Organist Competition Co-Chair Report

John Ledwon Co-Chair

My activity as a co-chair of the Young Theatre organist Competition this past year:

- Discussed with Denise Anderson possible adjudicators for the 2020 YTOC...for both the blind and actual competition
- DA contacted three theatre organ artists to serve as adjudicators for the blind competition.
- Discussed 2020 convention arrangements and logistics with Michael Fellenzer.
- DA brought up the possibility of a "virtual" competition if the 2020 convention was postponed. I expressed my thoughts that while I was not in favor of this approach, I would help wherever possible.
- Discussed with DA and we decided to extend the age requirement to include 25-year old artists if the 2020 competition was not held. Age verification would be a requirement for a 25-year-old to enter the competition.
- This year's YTOC event has been canceled due to the postponement of the 2020 Convention caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. As of the cutoff date (April 1) there were only three candidates who had entered which is the absolute minimum number of candidates needed to implement a competition. On April 2 DA and I received an email from a candidate withdrawing his name from this year's competition due to personal issues and the convention postponement. He stated the lack of a competition in front of a live audience was not an event he wished to participate in. His withdrawal left only two candidates which would not be enough to hold a viable competition. Because of

this and regardless of the postponement of the convention there could not have been a legitimate YTOC this year.

This distressing circumstance brings up something that I have tried to see implemented for the past several years...without success. ATOS needs to go public with all the youth programs that are available under the American Theatre Organ Society's banner. The Scholarship Program, the Summer Youth Experience and the Young Theatre Organist Competition need to be publicized to young and aspiring organists across the country. Our "preaching to the choir" is not giving us the necessary number or quality of young organists that we need to operate a viable competition...or provide the necessary aspiring organists to replace those that will retire before too long.

This search for young organists is not as difficult a task as it might sound, the American Guild of Organists has two areas that would be beneficial to ATOS youth activities:

- Their Pipe Organ Encounters (POE) runs eight POE events each summer around the country. Why not partner with them and get a theatre organ site on the program where the POE participants could interact with a theatre organ. After they have had that opportunity ATOS Youth Programs could be discussed and literature presented.
- On the AGO website: (<https://www.agohq.org/academic-degree-programs/>), a list of all the colleges, universities, and conservatories that offer degrees in organ studies. The difficult portion of this mission has already been done, the AGO list offers a link to every one of these colleges, universities, and conservatories. All that needs to be done is to contact these educational facilities and provide them with information on the youth programs of ATOS. This notification need not be more than an email flyer that expounds on the ATOS youth organist programs that the music department secretary prints out and posts on student bulletin boards. Obviously, a personalized letter should be included in this email to the department chair with further explanation of the ATOS youth programs.

Contacting K-12 educational facilities could be implemented by enlisting local ATOS chapters to open communications with local area magnet and performing arts schools and local media outlets to reach the younger people who might have an interest in the theatre organ.

The local AGO Chapter here in Las Vegas has a highly successful concert series that employs many young artists, I have spoken to all of those that have performed recently at the UNLV Doc Rando Recital Hall's 3/53 Rudolf von Beckerath organ. They are intrigued by the theatre organ but most of them have never had the opportunity to sit down at one of these captivating instruments and explore its resources. Many of them are also proficient in pop and jazz so the transition to the theatre organ would be an easy adaptation of their skills. Remember also that David Gray, Alex Jones and Aaron Hawthorne are classically trained musicians who play stunning theatre organ. Here lies a great opportunity to enlist new young talent to the theatre organ. The opportunity has been out there for decades but never tapped. As an ATOS Director I tried to get awareness started of this vital outreach but never could find any interest.

The theatre organ movement is generally in a state of decline in this country (and worldwide for that matter) and while this might be the future, we owe it to ourselves and those who have worked feverishly hard to promote the theatre organ to search the untapped resources that need to be explored, pursued and realized. We could be pleasantly surprised and rewarded by the response we receive.

I challenge the current and future ATOS Board to implement this outreach program.

We have nothing to lose and copious gains to be realized.

Respectfully submitted,

John Ledwon