

PRESERVATION, PISTONS, AND PERFORMANCE (or How *Do* I Play That Thing?)
by Clark Wilson

Your editor has asked me for some comments on a thought-provoking subject from the standpoint of one who is engaged in both the playing and maintenance of our beloved pipe organs. Following are a few personal observations (as discussed at length with some high-powered cohorts) on three issues that somewhat converge as we move along.

In these days of heightened awareness for the importance of preservation of the few original theatre pipe organs that we have left, there sometimes comes the question of combination actions. Is it enough to have 10 Divisionals as the manufacturers provided, or is it necessary to have the 40 or 50 Generals on 64 memories that seem to be increasingly utilized to get through a program? And what about relays? Is the old electro-pneumatic one OK or do we need solid-state?

This scribe is ancient enough to remember playing a number of organs both in concert venues and pizza emporia that had few or *no* pistons in working order. The stories of organs across the country with no operable combination action back in the “old days” (i.e. the 1960s and even the ‘70s) are legion. I can recall John Muri and others recounting that if one had *any* pistons in working order, one considered himself lucky indeed. Of course, in those days, virtually no organ had anything but its factory relay.

So, does this all sound like a horror story from the dank past? I don’t think so. I still have a few prized records (yes, vinyl) that the organists cut with no combination action at all. The results were tremendously musical, varied, and astounding when one came to realize that it was all hand done. I remember one great show that Walt Strony played at the Chicago Oriental back in 1977 in which he had no buttons. I fondly (!) recall playing entire nights, weeks, and more on consoles where one had to hand register everything. Yes, it was plenty of work (you know, that “good tired”) but it was also excellent training and a valuable lesson in how to get in real touch with the instrument you were playing. If you couldn’t be a button pusher you had to know exactly where everything was and what it sounded like, as well as figuring out how to get around quickly. This was great early readying for a few concerts and film shows in later years where modern electronic combination actions on organs of as many as 60 ranks or more malfunctioned and left you sitting there to sink or swim.

Alright, then, where is all of this headed?

There are some folks that still go around urging groups to alter those few remaining original instruments and bring them up to “modern, playable” specifications; folks that would probably have little use for a Style 235 Less Horn. This, of course, infers to the owners that the organs are in some way terribly inferior. Such seems to be, at the very least, insensitive when aimed at a certain large 4-manual Wurlitzer, a very complete Special, a rare Page, a big Moller, or an historic Morton of over 30 ranks. It makes the preservationists and some of the truly kindred technicians (the people who like to be able to run the organ during a thunderstorm without worry) tear their ever-thinning hair, mostly because there isn't enough left nowadays to have many more sacrifices on the solid-state alter take place. Are we not content until we electrify every last instrument? Are we really doing our cause much good when we go around insisting that our own personal specifications be placed on a console before we can play? And never mind the poor tonal finisher who has tried to have the organ sound right when, at any moment, the Horn Diapason might be drawn at 1 1/3' to make a fake Grande Mixture Impromptu VII.

In this light, I well remember a prominent organist who spent all his rehearsal time redesigning the organ, then couldn't remember what was on his altered pistons and stopkeys. He made a mess of the program and not one of those alterations made any kind of positive contribution. Then there was another recent concert in which the organist often resorted to the “next” or “advance” piston and got lost. Once he had crashed he continued to burn because of not knowing where he was in his registrations or how to get out of it.

But don't misunderstand! We all know that there are plenty of times when the solid-state is most attractive. These include at venues that are subject to back-to-back performances (like films) with a number of different artists, or in places where there is little or no rehearsal time, a situation which is becoming more and more prominent. Or at venues where well-meaning individuals have placed an unworkable specification on the stoprails. I can remember one place where the solid-state was the only part of a Wurlitzer “restored” by a church organ outfit that *did* work!

There are now, of course, many instruments that exceed any original relay and combination's abilities for control, and a majority of organ owners want record/playback features or MIDI interface to augment those meager pipes. The electro-pneumatic equipment is not at its best in accomplishing some of these functions.

Old setterboards and Divisionals can indeed restrict a certain amount of freedom or our ability to run totally on auto pilot. But, on the other hand, I wonder if anyone would complain about the level of performance presented at the tremendous Atlanta Weekender of a few years ago. All the artists used almost identical pistons on the Fox Moller's vintage system and worked their way around from there. And how can anyone forget the exemplary and lauded performance given by Jim Roseveare at the Oakland Paramount for the 1983 convention in which he had a mere 40 Divisionals to work with (albeit there was the facility of Collective Generals as provided originally by Wurlitzer)? How *did* he manage to play what most felt to be one of the finest concerts that anyone had ever experienced?

There has been some ongoing talk about how much better (?!) George Wright might have done had he had a modern combination system. That seems a little presumptuous and also seems to infer that he certainly gave less than was possible. I think it misses the point. He did have the facility of a modern relay, combination system, and General pistons in his twilight years. There may be some debate about whether or not this affected his output one way or the other. But it's easy to sometimes forget that the old electro-pneumatic George was, and still is, the yardstick by which all others are measured, and that his music remains at the center of virtually all that we do. The fact that many organists seem to need banks of combination pistons to emulate what Wright got out of 2 manuals, 10 ranks, and 20 pistons says much. The fact that his recordings continue at the forefront and are played again and again and again due to their sheer musical brilliance says even more. How many modern recordings do you know of that are played once and put away? How many wear you out to listen? And, believe me, we'll all know it if another George (or heir to George's throne) ever comes along.

George, Ashley, Buddy, Billy (do we even need last names?) remain as benchmarks of elegant, beautiful, and artistic playing. Each one of them was "encumbered" with an old electro-pneumatic organ, console, and relay. Each did what was possible for one man to do in real time, and it was *clean*. (George in his prime, of course, double-tracked and double-timed but made

no serious attempt at disguising it, and the result simply added to the delight, not to the heaviness.) Each controlled himself and, as Jim Roseveare so often said, made genuine music rather than sacrificing it for the sake of insertion of endless runs, manual hopping, and piston and key changing while showing off, working the lift, and so on. Richard Purvis was also exactly on the money when he said that music cannot be made in more than one tense.

A particular concert program is brought to mind in which there were so many piston changes, jumps back and forth from one memory to another, lurches ahead to insert riffs and frills, flash, and other general near-mayhem that it basically became the concert stage equal of what happens after you step on an anthill. It all combined to put the music nearly out of business. A Music Performance/Theory professor friend asked after the third number, “does he always play like this?”. At the end of the show there was polite applause. I imagine the organist was quite put out that people weren’t on their feet, since that’s the standard reaction to most everything nowadays. But something had not happened. Sure, there was dash and flash, a ton of notes played, thousands of pistons pushed, and some complex material presented, but it didn’t *move* that audience. Maybe it tired everyone out. This fellow was ahead of himself and his natural rhythm and he was exploiting the organ too far. It was all aided and abetted by lots of pistons and multiple memories that simply became the focal point of the evening. I wondered to myself what he might have done had he had to ease off on that program a bit and what the reaction would have been then.

There was a recording a while ago in which some fine technical playing was displayed. The sounds changed constantly. I can’t imagine how many memories must have been used. But, and for all that, there was something in the actual *music* that didn’t gel; something that didn’t come together in a lilting and satisfying way as it does when you listen to vintage Boston Pops. Was it more a display of dexterity and that focus on the combination action that got in the way? You found yourself wishing for a full half-chorus played on a single un-tremmed Diapason.

Ed Stout observes in his January/February column the desire of some present-day organists to dumb down (a popular and oft-used modern phrase in America meaning “to simplify”) a program when there aren’t infinite facilities available. It seems to me that we, as presenters of professional-

grade shows, ought to be entitled to enough rehearsal time from a visiting organist that he might be able to get around on the organ with natural ease and surety, and that he not have to rely solely on preset buttons or engage in anything less than his very best. Either that or we should get a discount. Allowing oneself time to familiarize intimately and *know* the instrument is the only way that I'm aware of to achieve a genuine high end musical experience. Sure, we all come in "on the fly" every now and then for one reason or another, but there is no substitute for time spent getting to know your steed. Maybe we could equate it to being in touch with the road in a really fine sports car versus plodding along in a computerized bus that drives itself. That's where the *real* satisfaction comes from. And, as a performer, each of us ought to know deep down when he's done a really, really, good job or, likewise, when he's simply gone through the motions.

This brings to mind a performance of a little ways back on a smaller original Wurlitzer that had the entire audience wondering just where they had put all the Generals. The organ had 29 Divisionals and they were enough, along with plenty of hand registration, to provide a kaleidoscopic palette of sounds. The music obviously did not suffer. What the guest organist did that day was certain proof of intimate familiarity with the organ and the ability to get around it in a flash. It was quite amazing but it was tasteful and we weren't overloaded.

All of this said, I don't plead for a minute that we have no General pistons and memories on theatre organs, or that we throw out the combination system! Solid-state and Generals are the standards of the day. We all use them when they're there, and they can indeed make life easier. You don't have to re-set the console the next time you're asked back.

But I also notice that a little of that dumbing down (is it really down?) could sometimes be a good thing if we are truly interested in the *music*. The legendary Sidney Torch once said that the cinema organ was the easiest thing on which to be vulgar. He also said that faster (and more) wasn't necessarily better ("Just because I can drive fast doesn't make me a good driver"). Rosy said that numerous composers didn't need too much of *our* help in improving their music. I believe that they were both right, and that we should examine and keep in check how we make use of all the modern conveniences that are available to us at the console. Along with ranks of pipework, traps, booze, or a swimming pool full of chocolate, just because

it's there doesn't mean that you have to have all of it all of the time. As went the old vaudeville saying, "always leave them wanting more".

So Hooray for the Senate, and for Cedar Rapids' little Balaban (12 ranks wasn't so "little" once upon a time), and for the Castro and the Foxes, and others that still stand with factory parts intact. The solid, in-touch "ka-bump" of the pistons and the dead-on accuracy of the key actions are real-time and unequalled. They can be fixed, there's nothing to upgrade every year or so, and once a piston is set it *stays* set. They don't act like a 70 foot RV in a windstorm when you get a lot of the organ going. (Did you know a Wurlitzer relay can be repaired while the organ is being played, or that you don't have to eliminate the wind in a console to have a memory combination system?) There is enough there on which to play beautifully. Perhaps it is not ironic that some of the finest performances of all time have taken place on such instruments because they were "only" equipped with original (alright, limited) material. Perhaps we should all be required occasionally to perform and listen to an afternoon's entertainment on a 5-rank organ with a piano console and no pistons. Maybe we should think twice about how many more organs we alter or press that canine instinct upon. Afterall, where are the Kimballs, Mollers, Marr & Coltons, Pages, Genevas, Gottfrieds, and other brands of yesteryear? Ever see a United States or a Louisville Uniphone? We most seriously need to *preserve* that little which is left. Don't change just for the sake of change. If it hasn't been altered by now, it should *not* be altered.

Now, there's certainly room for some disagreement and lively discussion here. It has been argued that the original organs were never intended for two-hour recitals, although a number of them were featured in solo concerts every weekend from the start. It may be that modern ears are so different that they require a bigger sonic experience to be impressed. (I remember with a smile a few of the supposedly-well-heeled that were *unimpressed* with the sound of the fabled 27-rank Chicago Theatre organ when it was temporarily resurrected a few years ago - too soft and buried, you know!)

It is certainly true that not all organists play solely on the Generals. By no means does every organist overload the audience. The musical level is the highest it has ever been, and we have a presence in places that could only be wished for years back. There *are* still some original instruments out there!

By the way, we all need to keep at the top of our lists the absolute necessity for an organ, no matter what it is, to be in prime condition if we expect any artist to be able to give their all. (And do be sure that the Pedal pistons fire with the Accompaniment if you want *anyone* to be satisfied and able to concentrate on making music.)

In the end, the old adage rings true: quantity is not necessarily all-important. Quality is. Just as in a genuine Unit Orchestra, less *can* be more. Complexity is only fully effective when placed beside simplicity, and polite suggestion, rather than a hit over the head, is always more pleasant.