



What is the Wichita Wurlitzer?

Question:

People often ask: What is the Wichita Wurlitzer; and, what is the significance of the instrument and comparisons with other instruments?

Answer:

The Wurlitzer is an instrument that consists of multiple components designed to allow a single performer to use 4 keyboards and a set of pedals to produce sounds of complete orchestra of over 100 musicians. The combination of sounds created by this single person is virtually endless. The significance of the Wichita Wurlitzer is that this instrument is the finest example of the theatre organ.

The significance of the Wichita Wurlitzer is a sound that has been retained since 1926 and has never been duplicated.

Instrument Details:

Briefly, the instrument consists of:

- a console where the player sits (the control center of the instrument) weighing 1,700 pounds,
- 2,700+ pipes (the sound sources of the different voices in the instrument) and associated chests and wind regulators weighing 50,000 pounds,
- electrical wiring (that sends the signals between the console and the mechanisms that open and close the air that flows through the pipes), and
- the blower provides the air supply for the pipes (driven by a 37,000-watt motor) that supplies up to 5,000 cu ft / min (enough to supply a complete air change for room 25 ft wide x 25 ft long x 8 ft high each minute) weighing 5,000 pounds.

All Wurlitzers received initial voicing and tuning at the Wurlitzer factory. After installation in their venues, final voicing and tuning resolved any issues associated with shipping and installation. After this final voicing, the installation was complete.

Based on factory records, Wurlitzer built 2,238 pipe organs. Most of the Wurlitzers were standard models. Wurlitzer 'Specials' were the custom instruments. The six largest organs built by Wurlitzer all were specials and key specifications are shown below.

Wurlitzer 'Specials'

Opus No.	Original Ranks	Original Location	Factory Ship Date	Current Ranks	Current Location	Metro Population	
1458	36	NY Paramount	9/25/1926	38	Wichita Wurlitzer	664,610	1.0
1894	36	Detroit Fox	6/14/1928	36	Detroit Fox	4,292,060	6.5
1904	37	Brooklyn Fox	7/5/1928	xx	Various		
1997	36	St. Louis Fox	11/26/1928	36	St. Louis Fox	2,811,588	4.2
2012	36	San Francisco Fox	12/29/1928	36	Disney's El Capitan Hollywood	13,131,431	19.8
2179	58	Radio City Music Hall	9/28/1932	58	Radio City Music Hall	20,153,634	30.3

Reading across the columns are the Opus (Serial) Number, original ranks and location, factory ship date followed by current ranks and location. The next two columns describe their current installations. The current metro area population and a multiplier based on Wichita's population are the last two columns.

For all instruments, the voicing and tuning is vital to the success of the installation. Specialists were recognized for their expertise. Jesse Crawford, organist, and tonal visionary was one of the most respected of these experts.

Comments by national experts:

- “Well known for his solo performances, recordings, and interpretations of the music of the day, Crawford made several suggestions to Wurlitzer on particular features that he wished to have included in the organ and he took a hand in the all-important tonal finishing in the theatre. It was this last step that would eventually be perhaps the most critical in elevating the organ to a ‘magical’ status. Dan Papp, another tonal genius, and part-time master technician to the Wurlitzer Company, was charged with the permanent care of the instrument and, between Crawford and Papp, she underwent a rigorous refining process which lasted for months. Papp was often heard to remark that Crawford was difficult, but that ‘what he wanted was good.’ And it showed. There were four other identical Specials that followed ... none ever quite measured up to the Paramount's.” – Clark Wilson
- “Out of more than 10,000 theatre pipe organs built, Wichita is home to the finest example ever conceived and executed...The Wichita Wurlitzer.” – Ken Double
- “The beauty and acoustics of the Paramount movie palace, the artistry of Crawford and the majesty of the Wurlitzer tone made this organ the greatest of them all - the envy of every other city.” – Jack Bethards

The Wichita instrument is one of the six largest instruments manufactured by Wurlitzer. The next largest city with a Wurlitzer ‘Special’ is St. Louis which is 4.2 times the Wichita population. The other cities are even larger with the original location for the Wurlitzer, New York City, 30 times Wichita's population. Wichita is the smallest city on the list yet it houses the premiere instrument.