



A Perspective

Jack Bethards

The Mormon Tabernacle Organ in Salt Lake City is generally considered to be the iconic concert-church organ. Among theatre organs the Wichita Wurlitzer holds exactly the same position of honor. Just as Aeolian-Skinner, builder of the Tabernacle organ, was the Rolls-Royce of classical organ builders, Wurlitzer was the Bentley of the theatre organ world. It was the natural choice of America's premier theatre - the New York Paramount and its star organist, Jesse Crawford. Crawford, known as The Poet of the Organ, is generally considered the greatest theatre organist of all time - the Fritz Kreisler of the keyboards. 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.

When the movie palace era ended, this masterpiece found a new home in Wichita. I can attest to the fact that the magnificent tonal qualities of the Wurlitzer have been maintained and even enhanced in its Wichita home. I had the privilege of hearing and examining it at the Paramount in the company of its installer and caretaker, Dan Papp. I have heard it several times in Wichita, even appearing three times on stage as conductor of an orchestra for the Lyn Larsen Show. What an honor it was to perform with this legendary instrument.

I find it interesting that it is in America's heartland - not on the East or West coast -- that these two great organs - the Salt Lake Tabernacle and the Wichita Wurlitzer - are cherished, protected, and enjoyed as National Treasures. The people of Wichita should be very proud, indeed.

For forty years Jack Bethards has been president and tonal director of Schoenstein & Co., Organ Builders, established in 1877. In addition, he is a nationally known organ consultant. Jack worked on his first Wurlitzer organ at age 13 and has been captivated by them ever since.

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