ADRIAN PHILLIPS THEATER

ESSAY I BY **NATHAN BRYSON**

Adrian Phillips Theater

Jim Whelan Boardwalk Hall
Atlantic City, New Jersey
W.W. Kimball, Op. 7073, 1930

THE W.W. KIMBALL ORGAN, OPUS 7073, OF THE ADRIAN PHILLIPS Theater is one of the largest such original installations left in a public entertainment venue in the nation. Boasting an impressive four manuals, 55 ranks, and 4,151 pipes, in any other venue it would be the showcase instrument, but it often finds itself overshadowed by its much larger neighbor, the seven-manual, 449-rank Midmer-Losh organ located in adjacent arena.

The Theater itself, is a room of gigantic proportions. It is 181 feet long, 128 feet wide, and 75 feet high, and seats 3,000 people (including the rear balcony). The organ is situated in two chambers, one on each side of the stage in the standard Main–Solo arrangement typical for most theatre organs of the era. The console is located in the musician's balcony (a transposed orchestra pit) halfway along the inner side of the room about 110 feet from the nearest chamber and about 150 feet from the left chamber (facing the stage).

Designed with the accompaniment of motion pictures in mind, it is especially successful at creating the illusion of a full symphony orchestra as well as producing an incredible array of unique sound effects such as birds, trains, sirens and gongs. It was the intention of Mr. Lincoln Dickey, the first manager of the Hall to use this room both as a dance hall and as a motion picture theatre. Therefore, he wanted an organ of the orchestral type, or as he viewed it, a "theatre organ". Emerson Richards, architect of both instruments in the Hall, was unwilling to design the organ for the limited purpose of accompanying motion pictures and therefore proposed an instrument that was orchestral in character but would likewise have the foundation of a classic pipe organ ensemble. To accomplish this, he departed from the usual design of eight to fifteen "units" of orchestral reeds, flutes, strings, and diaphones all on high wind pressures, and included proper choruses of diapasons, mixtures and reeds in each chamber. The resulting specification includes nineteen straight stops and twenty-three unit stops. The combination proved to be an outstanding success and an organ of solid but brilliant character resulted.

The instrument was completed in 1930 and dedicated on May 25th in a recital by organist Rollo Maitland. Since its completion, the Kimball organ has played for countless graduation ceremonies, religious services, conventions, and dinners. The oft-overlook instrument soldiered on faithfully for many decades receiving only occasional care from curators whose attention was stretched thin as they cared for a campus-wide total of 504 ranks with a shoestring budget.

With a massive wall of windows facing the Atlantic Ocean, one is hard-pressed to find a more idyllic setting than the Adrian Phillips Theater. The proximity to the ocean and lack of conditioned air in the room for the first four decades of the instrument's life, took its inescapable toll. The chambers, with their exceptionally thick shades that automatically close when the organ's blowers are off, fared better than the console which is prominently displayed in an open balcony. The chambers were by no means exempt from dirt buildup, some of which is still evident on two chests that have not had their pipework removed and rackboards re-finished, but the somewhat sheltered environment provided a modicum of protection.

The large four-manual horseshoe console, on the other hand, had no such chamber to shelter it from caustic dust and residue that inevitably accompanies trade shows and conventions. This airborne debris combined with vast humidity swings and frequent use resulted in significant deterioration of the handsome console by the last quarter of the twentieth century. Broken contacts, wiring failures, wind leaks and de-laminating keys combined to create a difficult playing experience. Injury was added to insult during the massive renovation of the building in 1999-2000 when the humongous cables to the relay were unceremoniously cut, the relay removed, and windlines to the high-pressure step-up blower were severed. What had been merely unpleasant became completely unplayable.

Despite the challenges facing both the Kimball and Midmer-Losh organs, a stalwart group of individuals continued to advocate for the organs and formed the *Atlantic City Convention Hall Organ Society*. Following the retirement of the third curator of organs, Dennis McGurk in 1998, this group took up the cause of protecting the organs with the goal of future restoration. As a result of their efforts, a $1.17 million-dollar grant was awarded by the New Jersey Sports and Exposition Authority, the owners of the building at that time, to be put towards the restoration of the Kimball organ and to return the Right Stage chamber of the Midmer-Losh to its pre-1998 state. It was a lengthy journey, but by 2005 a plan was set in place and restoration of the Kimball organ was slowly set in motion.

The fourth curator of organs, Carl Loeser, was brought on in 2007 and immediately set to work on the Kimball organ. The most significant damage was addressed first–a new solid-state relay was purchased in 2008 to replace the original pneumatic system. The console was sent out for restoration, making its way to Reno, Nevada to the shop of the late Ken Crome, who meticulously restored the elegant woodwork of the imposing console. The original pedalboard was restored, and new keyboards were procured from Organ Supply Industries. The keyboards were built as replicas of the original, with the same piston layout and second touch contacts. The decision was made to install new electric stop action motors and a multi-level combination action. The original stop tabs were considerably

deteriorated, and new tabs were purchased. The exact specification and layout, however, were carefully retained. The console was restored to active service ca. 2012 and the renovated Kimball was showcased publicly in 2013.

Concurrent with the console work, two chests from the Solo division were removed for restoration. The high-pressure reeds, Solo cellos, and several color reeds were all restored and the chests rewired. The remaining chests, including offsets, retained their original wiring and were connected to the new relay.

With the Kimball organ playing once again, the organ resumed its role in the life of the theatre and was featured during the Wedding of Sea, a large Catholic service held annually at Boardwalk Hall, in silent films and regular tours. Behind-the-scenes restoration work continued slowly, but with the Kimball playing, much attention once again shifted to its larger sibling. That trend shifted somewhat in 2019, thanks to a grant from the American Theater Organ Society. The grant paid for the materials needed to releather all four of the large manual chests in the Main chamber (left stage), clean flue pipework, rewire the chests and replace the tuning slides on the *Mixture V*. All note pouches were replaced, primaries releathered for both pitman chests and unit stops, new valves installed, and gasket material replaced. With the pipework removed from several of the chests, the opportunity presented itself to releather some of the bass offset chests that would have otherwise been impossible to reach. A few bass offset chests still require releathering but are functional and can be accessed without removing pipework. Likewise, several tremulants and wind regulators will be restored as time and funds permit.

A second grant from the ATOS was awarded in 2020 and proved to be a significant and unexpected blessing. The grant would cover materials for the two Solo chests that had not yet been re-leathered as well as the restoration of the *Brass Trumpet 8′* by Trivo. At 11:00 a.m. on March 16, 2020, our staff along with all other staff in Boardwalk Hall were called into a meeting and told the building would be closing at 5:00 p.m. that day and the governor's stay-at-home order put into effect immediately. We very quickly dropped bottom boards and pouch boards from the two Solo chests and loaded our cars with Kimball parts and the appropriate tools to work at home for what we thought would be a relatively short quarantine period. As weeks stretched into months, we were able to return and gather more material to work on in our personal workshops and majority of the releathering of the two chests, pouches, primaries and gasketing, was all done at home. As in the Main chamber, select offset chests remain to be releathered and several ranks of pipes along with their respective rack and toe boards will be cleaned as time permits.

Another recent project has been to remove the large expression shutters, four at a time, to clean and regrease bearings, and replace the felt gaskets. Already enormously effective, the shades move quietly and quickly, giving the organist a maximum range of dynamic expression. In May 2021 we were able to acquire the original Kimball nine-foot concert grand piano that was originally delivered with the organ in 1930. While no official records have been found regarding its subsequent disposition, it is believed that the piano was sold as surplus around 1976 and made its way to a collector in New Jersey. It languished in a garage for the next four and a half decades until the owner passed away in 2020 and we were able to purchase the piano from his estate. We hope to connect it to the organ as it was originally intended in the very near future, completing the restoration of instrument's tonal resources. Finally, a roll-player capable of playing selected unit ranks remains extant in the balcony adjacent to the console, awaiting future restoration.

A rare full-on image of the massive Kimball console, normally obscured from view by its balcony placement.

CREDIT: Nathan Bryson