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Ready ... Aim ... Fire

ALLEN VERSUS BARTON

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During the “first resurgence” of interest in theatre organs, generally considered to be the early 1950s, electronic home organs began to gain a foothold. When stereophonic high-fidelity systems began to appear in dealers’ showrooms, they were often demonstrated with a George Wright theatre organ recording. The Wright Hi-Fi Records output no doubt helped close a huge number of stereo system sales. It’s a fair thing to conclude that these same systems and records helped to promote the popularity of home organs.

How, then, to account for the two questions that every home organ sales person from the ’60s and ’70s heard from nearly every prospect: “Does it have a banjo stop?” and “Can it play Hawaiian music?” Now, perhaps I led a sheltered life, but I never heard a pipe organ with a believable banjo stop, or a pitch-slide switch on the swell pedal. But, we weren’t selling pipe organs, so we dutifully demonstrated with a few bars of “The Chicken Polka” and “Aloha Oe.”

The big electronic manufacturers—Allen, Baldwin, Conn, Lowrey, Rodgers, Thomas, Wurlitzer, and so on—all tried

to convince us they faithfully reproduced the voices and grandeur of the pipe organ. Some did a very credible job on the classical organ side, but not so much on the theatre side. Some voices were very good; most were fair at best. Nobody was likely to be fooled into thinking they were hearing a pipe organ.

In most cases, the traps were particularly bad. Cymbals sounded like sand blocks, and snare drums sounded like sand blocks combined with a washtub. No matter how good the imitative voices became, the traps were the dead giveaway. Be that as it may, the surviving electronic organ companies continued to develop their products and improve. Some fell by the wayside; by the 1990s there were only two major players left: Allen and Walker. In the mid-2000s, Walker decided to focus on the classical organ market, leaving Allen as the only serious player in the “traditional” theatre organ market. The most impressive improvement was the realism of the sampled traps. Cymbals sounded like cymbals, and snare drums sounded like snare drums!

Some companies would have figured that being the only significant fish left in

the pond, they could relax a bit. Not Allen. They continued to improve and refine their product (a late GW4 bears about as much resemblance to an early model as an aged prime filet mignon does to a select-grade round steak—in the right hands, both can be very tasty, but you’ll never mistake one for the other). New ranks were sampled, less-than-ideal samples were replaced without fanfare during the production run, tremulant and expression algorithms were fine-tuned, all in an attempt to reproduce the pipe “experience” as faithfully as possible.

For the most part, this was remarkably successful. There were certain “tells,” though, which left no doubt you were not listening to pipes. They were simply artifacts introduced by stretching samples in some less-often played parts of the compass, such as the extreme highs and extreme lows, or the physics of audio reproduction (speakers have physical limitations different from pipes and shutters, and exceeding these limits results in audible degradation). In most cases, it required a pretty sophisticated ear to hear them, and very few of them were truly

objectionable. But at the end of the day, you probably wouldn't put a digital on the stage with a theatre pipe organ and expect it to fool anyone.

Until now.

You've seen the Allen "We're Fixin' for a Showdown" ad on the back cover of a couple of recent issues of THEATRE ORGAN. When the ad first arrived from Allen, we had this nagging thought in the back of our mind that this might not be a real good idea. Put a digital instrument on the same stage with the pipe organ from which the samples were taken? Play them at the same time? Nope, not a real good idea at all.

Boy, were we wrong.

Yes, a few of the "tells" are still there, but I'd put money on this: at least 95% of the audience didn't—and couldn't—spot them. I tend to listen to concerts with my eyes closed (some people mistakenly think I sleep through them) as it helps me to concentrate on the music without distraction. Without seeing the artists' hands, it was nearly impossible to tell which was which. Even with eyes open and watching closely, it was unbelievably difficult and I'm quite certain I would have been wrong as often as right had someone asked "was that the Allen or the Barton?"

More important, every single person I asked said that the Allen definitely held its own against the Barton. So, what happened to the arguments about physics and moving air?

Simply put, we think the proof is in the pudding; if you can't tell the difference while it's being played, all the scientific arguments about why one can never be as good as the other go out the window. Bumblebees really can fly, even though nearly every aerodynamic principle says they can't.

This was a rare opportunity to hear the "original" organ and the sampled digital version played live in the same environment—what better comparison could you have?

The T321Q-SP is a very impressive instrument. John Nelson reported that it was completely "stock," although it was equipped with the optional audio expansion (nothing you couldn't order with yours). It did receive the digital equivalent of tonal finishing, but nothing unusual; in your home, it could (and should) receive the same treatment.

Will it sound the same? Probably not, unless you have a space acoustically equivalent to the auditorium in which we heard it. But you wouldn't want it to anyway.



You want a sound which fits your space, while still retaining the characteristic Barton sounds.

We're going to declare ourselves referees for this showdown, and we score it a draw. Both Allen and Barton came through the night unscathed, in our view; the Allen didn't beat the Barton, but it also wasn't beaten by it.

Some might say, "Yes, but look at the two artists! David Gray and Mark Herman could bang on a Studebaker hubcap and make it sound good." Well, yes, they probably could. But the point isn't their considerable talents—it's how accurately the Allen recreated the Barton, with all its subtleties, nuances, and shades of gray.

It was a win-win-win-win. Two great musicians, and two great organs—what more could you ask?

We're Fixin' for a Showdown!

NEW! T321Q-SP



At Allen, we think nothing compares to the sound of a real organ in a real room. And, if you're coming to the ATOS Convention we bet you agree! Otherwise, we could all stay home and listen to theatre organ videos on our computers.

So, we're fixin' to bring the "heat" to Indy. We've sampled the Big Bad Barton at the Warren Performing Arts Center and we're putting the results up against the real McCoy for a musical showdown. No holds barred! There ain't gonna be nothin' "virtual" about it. But it sure is gonna be Real Fun! Don't miss it!

Allen Organ ... No muss, no fuss! Just plug and play!

Allen organs
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The Whole Package!

Allen theatre organs have always been the “Real Deal”! And, not just because of their sound, either. It’s their “look” and “feel”, as well! Handsomely crafted consoles in beautiful finishes; responsive and reliable keyboards; authentically-styled curved rails and moving stops; custom-designed audio systems that fill the whole room, not just a corner of it. And now, the “whole package” has multiplied itself with the availability of a complete Wurlitzer, Barton, Morton and Classical organ, all in a single console!

“Less is More” is a phrase best applied to taxation. Don’t Skimp on your dream! Treat yourself to the “More is More” world of an Allen Theatre organ. You’ll find that beauty is not just in the eye of the beholder, it’s in their fingers, feet and ears, as well!

